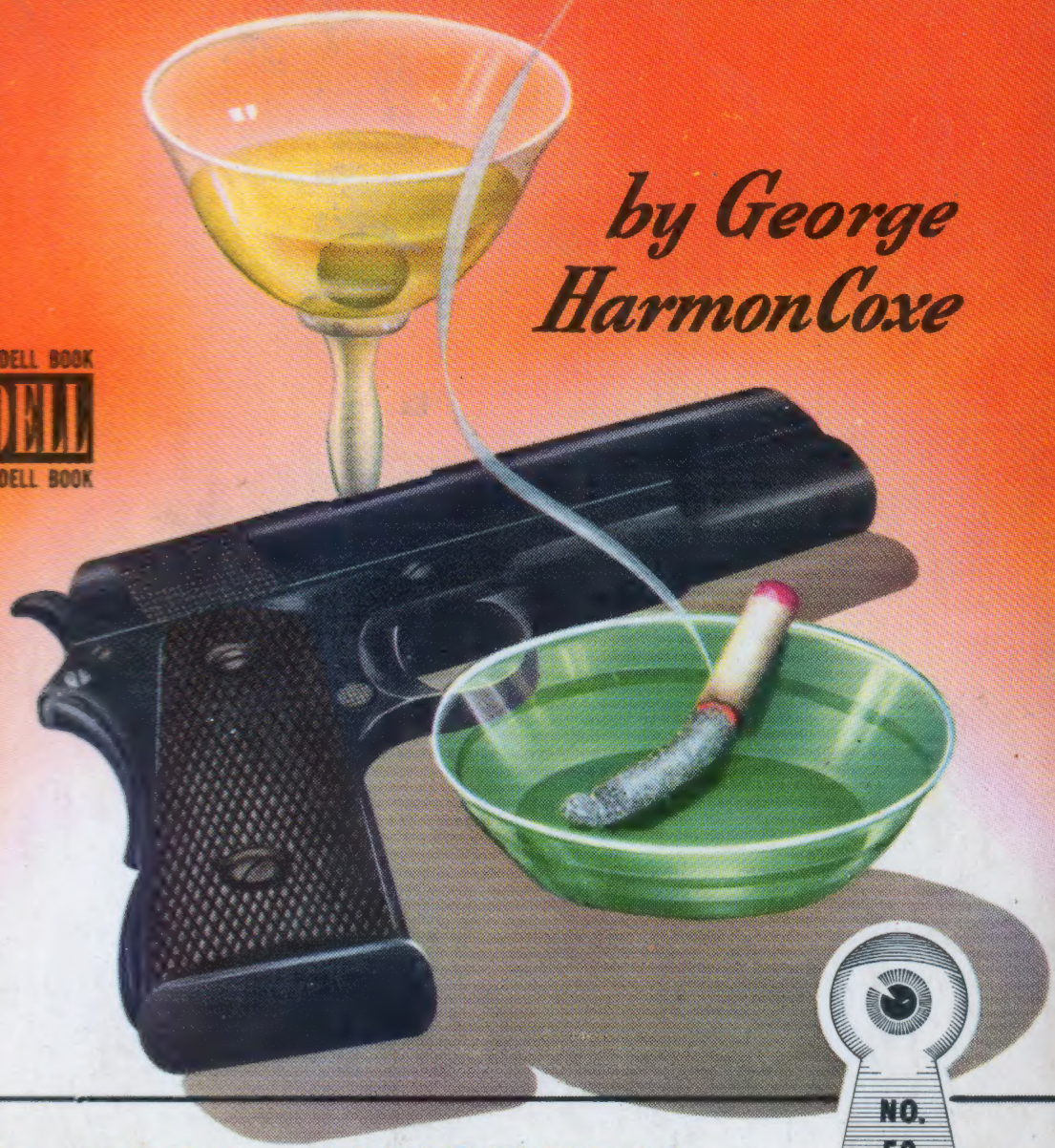
58

MURDER FOR THE ASKING

by George Harmon Coxe

A DELL BOOK
DELL
A DELL BOOK



NO. 58

A DELL MYSTERY

MURDER FOR THE ASKING

Persons this *Mystery* is about—

MAXFIELD CHAUNCEY HALE,
about six feet tall and broader than the scales called for, he has given up six-goal polo and a pony for a private detective agency—which has no business. He spends money easily, has plenty to spend, and he knows every night club doorman and headwaiter in town.

SUE MARSHALL,
Max Hale's secretary (at first the job seemed like the answer to a business girl's prayer), a pale, slender girl with straight, yellow hair, worn long and pulled severely back in a compact knot. She could be a knockout if she took off the horn-rimmed glasses and fixed her hair.

MARION POWELL,
a vital-looking girl with a tall, somewhat robust body that has solid-looking curves. Money, clothes, travel, and the right schools have perhaps spoiled her somewhat, but they have not destroyed her honesty or her ability to look life in the face without flinching. She doesn't believe that mother always knows best or that women are all kind and good like the storybooks say.

STEPHEN ALLENBY,
very definitely "first family," a man who would never shirk his duty, a shrewd and brilliant scion of a long line of Beacon Street educators, bankers, statesmen, and industrialists.

LYDA ALLENBY,
wife of Steve Allenby, and sister of Marion Powell with whom she has little in common; tall, dark, and superior with a classic sort of artificial beauty which shows to excellent advantage under the soft lights of a night club when a drink or two endows her with a little more humanness.

GENE GORHAM,
tall, handsome, and smooth all over, he looks like something just out of *Esquire*. Acceptable to all but the most strait-backed families, his low, confidential way of talking causes most women to leave his swank gambling salon just a little sore at their husbands.

ADELAIDE RANKIN,
an auburn-haired Amazon who wears gowns designed to take men's breath away and make them women-conscious. There is a lot of her—150 pounds to be exact—but the curves are in the right places, and she does not have that gross, horsy look common to most women her size. She knows how to keep Gene Gorham, her boss, on a strictly employer-employee basis.

BILL CARTER,
Marion Powell's fiance, a blond, handsome, vigorous-looking youth whose early inclinations to wildness are buried in the past, and he has taken a modest fortune through two depressions and doubled it.

MURDER FOR THE ASKING

Things this *Mystery* is about—

A torn piece of PAPER . . .

IOU's totaling $3,800 . . .

Four PROMISSORY NOTES . . .

Two FILE CARDS . . .

A .38 AUTOMATIC . . .

A VALISE full of money . . .

A warm LAMP BULB . . .

A SIPHON of soda water . . .

A *MAX HALE* DETECTIVE STORY

MURDER FOR THE ASKING

By GEORGE HARMON COXE

Author of "Four Frightened Women," "The Camera Clue," "Alias the Dead," "Murder for Two," etc.

The characters and situations in this work are wholly fictional and imaginary, and do not portray and are not intended to portray any actual persons or parties.

Author's Dedication—
FOR FREDERICK NEBEL

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Murder for the Asking

Chapter One: WITH A CREST

MAXFIELD CHAUNCEY HALE swung into the small but modern lobby of the Siddon Building, saw that it was devoid of traffic, and came to a sudden stop in the center of it. About six feet tall, and broader than the scale called for, he put his hands behind his back and surveyed the interior with a deliberate and practiced scowl.

The little brunette at the cigar stand ignored the candy salesman who leaned across the counter, straightened stiffly, and solemnly saluted. At the empty front elevator the uniformed Negro boy whipped to attention. The janitor, who was swabbing down the steps to the basement, stopped to chuckle; although too old for such nonsense, he had seen the ritual often.

The other elevator slid open and people spilled into the foyer. Hale winked at the brunette, whose smile was affectionate but wistful, grinned at the Negro, and stepped into the car.

Hale strode down the corridor of the third floor. Near the far end he palmed the knob of a door which said *M. C. Hale* on the frosted glass panel, and stepped into a spacious anteroom, furnished with a good blue rug, a filing cabinet, a leather-upholstered divan, and a large typewriter desk, behind which sat a girl, her nose buried in a book with a circulating-library jacket.

"Ah, my sweet." He sailed his hat toward the divan

and slid out of his coat. "What's new?"

"Nothing."

"Any phone calls?"

Sue Marshall spread the book face down on the desk and sat back with arms folded, a pale, slender girl with straight, yellow hair, worn long and pulled severely back to a compact knot. Horn-rimmed glasses lent additional seriousness to her expression, but behind them her hazel eyes were large and honest—and exasperated.

"There are never any phone calls," she said acidly, and put the folded arms on the desk. "Look, Mr. Hale—"

"Max."

"Max, then. I'm going to get another job."

"Don't be silly," Hale said. "You can't quit."

"I can."

"Oh, no, you can't." He slid a thigh across a corner of the desk and looked down at her, one brow arching and a crooked little smile tugging at his mouth.

She met his gaze, her jaw tightening stubbornly.

"If you get tough," he said, "I'll blacklist you in every office in town. And if you get real tough, I'll give you a raise. Now let's see you quit."

"It's not the money, and you know it," Sue said, refusing to smile. "You pay me thirty a week and I earn three. All I do is sit—and read. If there was only some work to do—"

"There'll be some work."

"No, there won't. The only time the telephone rings it's you—or some girl wanting to know where you are. I've been here four months; you've had this office a year. And you haven't had a single job. You know this detective business is only a hobby. It's all right, I guess. You have other interests, managing your estate and your sis-

ter's. You can afford to do as you please, and if you want to have this office, that's your affair."

"I've got a license," Hale said.

She gave him an oblique, disgusted glance. "What good is it? You haven't any practical experience—"

"I've got theory, though."

"—and no reputation." Sue hesitated and her hazel eyes were troubled. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have talked that way, but—don't you see? I don't want to quit. I can't earn as much in any other office; not at the start, anyway. But I'll be getting experience, business background."

"True." Hale gestured elaborately. "But what will you do for excitement?"

"What do I do now?"

"Ah, but wait. We must have patience. It may take time, but in the end you'll not be bogged down in the humdrum routine of business. You will have thrills and drama with your work. Excitement and glamour—"

Sue tried hard not to smile as he raved on with that intent, almost fierce expression on his broad face, as though he meant every word. She had been impressed the first week she had come to work. She had not been able to tell when he was kidding because it took her some time to recognize the telltale sparkle in his eyes, the crooked little smile that warped his mouth. Outwardly there was some basis for this impression of fierceness, both in the powerful, muscular bulk of his body and in the jet-black hair, the bony framework of his face.

She was still listening vaguely to his sales talk when the door opened and she saw a trim-figured man with a brown, pointed face hesitate on the threshold.

Hale, catching sight of the newcomer, nodded and

said efficiently, "I think that about covers it, Miss Marshall. Make three copies, please, and I'll sign them later."

"Mr. Hale?" the man asked. "Maxfield Hale?"

Hale bowed pleasantly and said he was.

The man produced a card case, but as though wanting to be quite sure of everything, he paused for one more inquiry, which he phrased with a definitely English accent. "You are a private investigator?"

It was a question which was the more surprised—Sue or Max Hale. There was a long moment of doubtful and somewhat incredulous silence; then, without daring to look at Sue, Hale uttered a firm, "Yes," and was offered a small engraved card bearing the name *Harold Barclay,* and in a lower corner a London address.

"Come in," Hale said, opening the door to the inner office. "And, Miss Marshall," he added importantly, trying not to grin at her look of astonishment, "if anyone wants me, I'm in conference. I'll have to call back."

He followed Barclay into a comfortable-looking room, furnished in walnut and leather and lined the length of one wall with an impressive crime library. Indicating a chair and offering a cigarette, he sat down behind the desk and wondered whether he could make the right impression, now that he apparently had the chance.

Something distinctly military had been in Barclay's measured, stiff-backed carriage when he crossed the room, and at first Hale thought the sharp-featured face seemed swart and foreign-looking. Now he noticed the border of pale skin at the hair line and knew the color had been burned there by the sun. The slightly narrowed eyes were steel blue. The hands that lit the cigarette were quick and nervous, slim-fingered but strong-looking.

Barclay blew out the match carefully. "Am I right in

assuming that what we say here is confidential?"

"Certainly." Hale was very serious.

"Good." Barclay hesitated again, as though trying to find the proper approach. He flattened his lips a little, and, bracing his elbows on the chair arms, leaned forward. "I'm no good at beating about the bush," he said bluntly. "I came here to kill a man."

Hale stared at him, started to grin. Then some impulse stifled the wisecrack he was about to utter and the grin slid away, leaving his glance stony. He could not fathom the bright, intent look in Barclay's eyes. There was not the slightest trace of a smile, nothing to indicate that this was any build-up; rather that look was unpleasant. Because he could not understand it, he said, "Look, Mr. Barclay. If this is some gag I'm not very much amused. I don't know who sent you here, but I haven't time—"

"You think I'm joking?" Barclay demanded.

"What would you think," Hale asked bluntly, "if I came into your office and tried it out on you?"

"Yes—I see what you mean." Barclay sounded apologetic. His glance touched some remote object and came back. "I suppose it does sound theatrical, doesn't it? But I assure you I am quite sincere."

"If you are," Hale said, "why tell me about it?"

"I need advice."

"Not from me you don't. If you *are* sincere, you need a lawyer—or a keeper."

"I understood you were a lawyer."

"I am, but—" Hale broke off, leaned across the desk. "Suppose we start straight. Who sent you here?"

"A friend of yours. You attended Cambridge?"

"For one year—four years ago."

"Suppose we say, then, that a mutual friend who knew you there told me to come to you."

Hale's thoughts slid back to the previous summer. He had been in England for a month, and he could recall but three men he had told of his avocation. One of them might have told Barclay. That part was all right, but—

"Perhaps I should modify my statement," Barclay went on. "I've traveled a long way to find this man. If I had caught up with him a week ago I should most certainly have killed him." He leaned back. "Now I have reasoned a bit further. At first I did not want to reason, but I believe now the price is quite out of proportion. I am not a very subtle man, Mr. Hale. Nor very clever. I'm more of, shall we say, a direct-actionist. I would have killed and I should have been caught. That would have meant two lives for the price of one."

"Two men?" Hale asked quietly.

"Two lives, I said. The man I speak of is responsible for the death of someone very dear to me. I'll tell you his name if you like."

"I don't want to know it," Hale replied. He was convinced now that Barclay meant what he said, and he did not like it. "I think you're out of line—'way out—"

"Please hear me out," Barclay asked. "I don't intend to kill now. The urge, the desire is there, but I think I can control it. I'm going to thrash him within an inch of his life." He was leaning forward again and his eyes were bright, narrow slits. "I'm going to hammer, pound, beat him down until he—"

He checked himself suddenly, his face flushing under its deep brown tan. "Sorry," he said thickly. "You're not interested in that, although if you had ever felt as I feel

you could understand. My point is, I have a job to do. I don't think there will be any complaint because this man stands to lose too much by going to court. But there is a possibility that I may be for it—which is why I am here. I'm a stranger to the country and to this city. If I am arrested I shall need legal help."

"I've been admitted to the bar, but I've never practiced," Hale said.

"But you could recommend someone? And what could I expect in the way of punishment?"

"That's hard to say. You might get off with a fine. You might get six months. If you use a gun or a weapon of some kind it will be a lot tougher because that would constitute a different degree of assault."

Barclay nodded thoughtfully and Hale took the opportunity to study him again, noting his wiry fitness, his immaculate, well-groomed appearance. "You've asked for advice," he said. "Okay, I'll give you some. Forget it. There must be some better way to—"

"There is no other way," Barclay interrupted. "Otherwise I wouldn't be here. Neither would he."

"And you've made up your mind," Hale said dryly.

"Quite."

"Are you sure you can stop?"

"Stop?" Barclay blinked. "Oh, you mean short of murder? Yes, I think I can."

"And how do you know you're capable of this—thrashing? This fellow's not just going to stand around and take it, you know."

"I'll take that chance," Barclay said, and with some reluctance produced an envelope from his pocket. "In case I can't bring it off, the story's in here. There's also a thousand-dollar draft made out to your order. Have

you some place where you could put it?"

"The filing cabinet can be locked," Hale said hesitantly, "but—"

"Splendid." Barclay stood up. For the first time his mouth softened. "I know it sounds melodramatic and all that, but I'm overlooking no possibilities. I expect I'll be able to manage all right, but in case something *should* happen to me, you'll have to take over. The thousand dollars will pay you for your time and the letter will give you the necessary information. If I don't reclaim it within twenty-four hours, you'd better open it."

Hale scowled, furrows slashing deep between his brows. He wanted to refuse point-blank. This was not the sort of assignment he had looked forward to. It sounded so very phony, and yet he did not think it was. What bothered him was that a friend had sent Barclay here, and the obligation was obvious. He had come a long way, depending on Hale for counsel. True, there was little he could do, but if he refused to help, the man would have no one to fall back on—and he might need someone if he persisted in his plan.

"Okay," he said finally. "Where are you staying?"

"At the Fenside. Room 526."

"Of course you know I still think you're crazy."

"I gathered as much," Barclay said dryly, pulling out his wallet. "I'll give you a retainer now."

"That's not necessary."

"Oh, but I insist Tomorrow I may need bail, don't you know? Or a barrister. And you'll have to help me get them. Will fifty dollars be all right?" He put the bills on the desk without waiting for a reply. He offered his hand, and, when Hale took it, a fleeting smile. With-

out another word he turned quickly and stepped to the door.

Hale remained at the desk until the door closed, his dark eyes troubled. With an abrupt, shrugging gesture, he opened a drawer and brushed the money into it; then he sat down and looked at the envelope. Across it was written *Harold Barclay,* and turning it over he saw that the flap had been fastened with a crimson wax seal a good inch in diameter and imprinted with a crest of some sort. He sat staring at it several seconds before he went out to talk to Sue Marshall.

Chapter Two: THE TWO SISTERS

MARION POWELL unlocked the door of her apartment, stepped inside, and started to remove the key before she sensed something wrong. Abruptly her head came around and she stiffened, with her hand still on the knob, her eyes darting about the room, her nostrils dilating as she sniffed the stale air.

She closed the door slowly and leaned back against it, a tiny frown puckering the bridge of her nose. An unnatural seriousness clouded her dark blue eyes, and she caught her lower lip gently between her teeth. Absently she opened her bag and dropped the key inside. There was a sharp snapping sound when she forced the catch shut and this break in the silence served also to demand some response. She pushed away from the door and started a tour of the room.

The smell of cigarette smoke hung in the air; mingling with it was another scent, more delicate, and, to her, distinctive. Twice before, she had come here to be struck with the impression that the room had been occupied

during her absence. Those other times there had been nothing so definite as cigarette smoke and the odor of perfume. Just little things, like the dents in the davenport pillows, the position of a chair. Now the ashtrays were clean, or relatively so, but when she went over to the fireplace, she saw cigarette stubs and, dropping to her knees on the hearth, fished out three of them. Two Camels and a Philip Morris. The Camels bore traces of lipstick; the Philip Morris did not.

She stood up, a vital-looking girl with a tall, somewhat robust body that had solid-looking curves. A plain red felt hat perched atop a mass of mahogany-colored hair, worn in a long bob, and beneath the camel's-hair coat were nice legs and trim ankles. Worry was in her eyes now, but the firm, rounded chin suggested a mind of her own and the courage of her convictions.

Presently she moved over to the telephone and picked it up. "Hello Graves? This is Marion. Is Mrs. Allenby there? . . . Well, if she comes in tell her I'm on my way out."

Max Hale was putting on his balmacaan when Marion Powell came into his office an hour later to greet the room with a smile. "So this is where you hide out?" she said, eyeing him with mild amusement.

"Well!" Hale's brows climbed. "This *is* my lucky day." He glanced over at Sue. "Didn't I tell you?"

Marion Powell surveyed her surroundings and seemed impressed with what she saw. She looked rather long at Sue, her eyes taking in the yellow hair, the nice skin, the glasses. She thought, She'd be a knockout if she'd take off those cheaters and fix her hair. Aloud she said, gesturing to include the office, "Not bad. Busy?"

"Just surprised," Hale said. "Come on in and see the master mind's inner sanctum."

He fixed a chair for her near his desk. She unbuttoned her coat, crossed her legs and leaned back, accepting both his cigarette and his light. "I like it," she said, eyeing the office with approval. "Are you doing much with it? Are you serious about this detective business?"

He waved his cigarette. "I haven't had much chance to find out. Of course it can never be a full-time job; I've got a living to make—or hang on to. But I might do something with it. I know I'd like to and—"

"No more six-goal polo?"

"Not even a pony. I haven't time for both, and I'd rather do this—at least until I find out how bad I am."

"Then maybe you can help me." Marion Powell sat up to grind out her cigarette.

With the preliminaries over, he saw that she was troubled, that her early casualness was affected. "What's it about?" he asked, and sat back to listen.

"My sister—Lyda." Marion Powell frowned and was silent a moment. "Do you know Gene Gorham, and that gambling salon of his?"

"I was there last week, with the rest of the suckers, and a couple of times at the spot he had before."

"Well, he's got some IOU's of Lyda's. And she's been seeing him. I still have that little apartment I leased when I was going to art school, and she was up there this afternoon. Stephen is coming back in a couple of days. I'm afraid Gene might go to him. So is Lyda—now."

Hale took the following seconds of silence to recall what he could about Gene Gorham. Appearing on the local scene three months previously and armed with sev-

eral apparently bona-fide letters of introduction from people in London, he had set about expanding and consolidating his acquaintanceship in a likable but efficient manner. Strikingly handsome, amusing, and apparently with plenty of money, he was seen everywhere—and, as a rule, with the right people. That a few doors were closed to him was no great handicap because he was invited to a sufficient number of gatherings to become acceptable to all but the more strait-backed families.

His personable frankness was engaging, and even at the beginning he had stated his reason for being in town. He was, he said, something of a gambler, but he liked to do his gambling in the proper surroundings. To do so was expensive and his method, while not new, was new to the city. He'd had great success—for a limited time—in London, which explained his letters. If these were not from the very top of the social crush, they were near enough for his purpose. And his psychology was sound. He talked about his plans just enough to stimulate curiosity, always promising to do something but never quite getting down to it until he had a sizable group practically begging him to start operations.

His first place was a newly decorated apartment, rented on a short lease. When he opened for business there was nothing to suggest he was doing anything more than entertaining friends. They came in evening clothes, played his two wheels, and left early. Most of them lost, but they expected to lose when they came; the point was they had a good time losing and the majority kept coming. They could gamble or not, as they pleased. A very few went for the free food and drinks and there were always enough who gambled to make the venture worth while. Two weeks of this and Gor-

ham announced that he was through. He closed the apartment and moved to a more sumptuous one where, a month later, he opened his current establishment.

Hale saw that Lyda Allenby had good reason to be worried about her husband. Stephen Allenby was very definitely "first family"; rather more so than his wife, who had been Lyda Powell. There had been an Allenby on Beacon Street as long as anyone could remember, and the long line of educators, statesmen, bankers, and industrialists that had borne the name spoke for the quality and strength of the strain. That Lyda Allenby should frequent a "rolling game" in her husband's absence would be distasteful to Stephen; that she should be in debt to a man like Gorham—

"She says it was innocent enough," Marion said, cutting in on his thoughts.

"She told you about it?"

"I just came from her. I made her tell. I tried it before, but she wasn't frightened then; she is now. Of course I knew she'd been gambling. Stephen's been away a lot, you know—he was in London six weeks this summer and he's been in the South looking over some mills on and off ever since—and Lyda gets bored easily." She examined the tip of a gloved finger. "The gambling part was all right, but I heard from someone else that she'd been seen with Gorham. Having lunch—things like that. When I accused her of it before, she laughed it off. Now she says the only reason she met him today was to get the letters and—"

Hale sat up, brows knotting. "Letters!"

"I don't think they're anything so awful. Lyda says they were just notes, telling him she'd meet him—that sort of thing. But you know Stephen."

Hale shook his head and grunted softly. "What she ought to get is a damn good spanking."

"Of course," Marion said quickly. "And you'd probably give it to her. Only Stephen won't."

Hale pushed his chair back, slid down and pushed his legs out, staring thoughtfully at the polished tips of his brown oxfords. "So Gorham's that kind of heel?"

"Not a heel, really. He's such a charming devil—"She broke off and colored faintly as he cocked an eye at her. "Well, he is."

"So you like him, too."

"I can't help liking him a little, damn him. And that's why I don't think he'll be reasonable. Lyda owes him thirty-eight hundred. He told her she could have the IOU's, notes, and everything for five thousand."

"That's not too tough. Pay him."

"Well—" Marion lowered her glance for the first time. "That's why I'm here. That's where you come in."

"Um-hum," Hale said dryly.

"No, really," Marion said. "You can lend it to me, can't you?"

"Here I'm thinking you want the services of a master mind and all you want is to borrow some dough."

"Please, Max. Stephen's handling all of Lyda's money, and she can't get that much without some explanation. And I don't get my estate until next month. And it has to be done today or tomorrow—before Stephen comes back. I'll give you a note and—"

"Don't be a monkey," Hale cut in. "I was only ribbing. Certainly you can have it."

"And you'll get the letters for us?"

He grinned and let his glance slide over her. He was not surprised that she stated her case so frankly. There

was very little pretense to Marion Powell. He liked her eyes, her full warm mouth. Money, clothes, travel, and the right schools had perhaps spoiled her somewhat, and lent a certain brusque assurance to her surface mannerisms, but they had not destroyed her honesty or her wholesome ability to look life in the face without flinching. These things had given her, although not yet twenty-one, a sophistication and philosophy that does not come to most girls until later—if ever.

She smiled at him, and the smile clung to the corners of her mouth. "And a private detective has to protect his client's confidences too, doesn't he?"

"A schemer too, huh?" Hale said.

"How much will it cost me?"

"This is high-class service. It'll cost you fifty bucks, payable now or when you get the letters."

"When I get the letters," Marion Powell said. "Now make out a note for five thousand and I'll sign it."

Hale waved her away. "Don't be silly."

"I'm not. You're going to pay out five thousand; I'm signing a note—with interest."

"You're doing no such thing," Hale growled.

Marion Powell was unimpressed.

"I most certainly am," she said firmly.

"You're a minor."

"I can write."

"Anyway, I haven't got a note."

"You've got a secretary. Let her make one out."

Hale got a little irritated by her stubbornness and opened his mouth to say so, when she rose abruptly and marched to the door. "Hey," he called.

Marion Powell leaned into the anteroom and said, "Mr. Hale wants you."

When Sue Marshall appeared a moment later, looking rather dubious, Hale flashed Marion a glance of resentment and told Sue what he wanted.

Afterward, when Marion had gone, with Hale's promise that he would speak to Gene Gorham that night, Sue said, "What do we do with the note?"

He moved over to her side and slid an arm around her waist. She let it stay there while she gave him a covert glance and saw that he was looking at the note.

"Do you realize, my dear, that fortune has at last smiled upon us? Two jobs in one afternoon."

"They don't sound very important to me."

"Ah, but this is o-n-l-y the beginning. Here"—he handed her the note—"put this in the card index."

"What index?" Sue asked, moving away from his arm.

He stared at her, grinned, then glanced at his strap watch. "Run out and buy one."

"With cards?"

"Certainly with cards. From now on, this office force has got to keep step with the investigating department. Type out a card for Barclay, with his hotel address and retainer; one for Miss Powell. Put the note with it. And listen, do you want to go out tonight—look over a swanky gambling lay-out while I talk to Gene Gorham?"

"No," said Sue.

The apartment Gene Gorham had rented to lend enchantment to his second venture in de-luxe gambling occupied the entire sixth and top floor of a new-looking building in the Kenmore section. The setback gave him an all-around terrace and a sweeping view of the Charles and Cambridge, and although the terrace was get-

ting too cool to be of any use to him, it did dress up the establishment and give it the proper setting to impress those who needed impressing.

When Max Hale arrived shortly before twelve that night, the foyer door was opened by a liveried butler and something about his appearance struck a responsive chord in Hale's memory, so that he looked a second time as he handed over his hat and coat, noticing that the man was quite bald, with a slack face, big hands, and a stooped, awkward way of holding himself.

"I don't believe you were here last week, were you?" Hale asked.

"No, sir," the butler said, turned quickly away, and continued across the room to an inner hall.

Beyond this the interior was pure swank. Tremendous in size, the room boasted an ankle-deep rug, dark blue walls with silver drapes, and a lot of wall-high mirrors with chromium borders. There was no evidence of gambling here. The indirect lighting was flattering to the half-dozen women who stood smoking and chatting with one another; and over in one corner another small group had gathered around a white piano, presided over at the moment by Gene Gorham, who was half-way through a softly rendered and rather good imitation of Dwight Fiske. Nodding as Gorham caught his eye, Hale continued across the room to an inner hall.

Five doors opened from this—two on either side and one at the end—and he turned through the first one on the right, stepping into a softly lighted room that was practically crowded with men and women grouped around the two roulette tables. Everyone was in evening dress, the men in tails and dinner coats, the women in diamonds and mink and ermine. It could have been a

first night at the opera from the splendor of the gowns and furs, but he had seen it all before and what impressed him was the atmosphere of hushed suspense. A lot of quiet tension in the air, but very little talk; none at all from the croupiers, who did not call the play, but merely spun the wheel, raked in, and paid off.

He moved slowly around the group at one table, and as he approached the other, Marion Powell detached herself from the edge and came toward him, followed by Bill Carter, her fiancé. "Hello there," she whispered.

"I didn't think you'd be here," Hale said.

"Lyda came. I couldn't keep her away." She pulled him into the hall. "She's a wreck, really. All nerves. Insisted on this last chance to get even."

"She knows about me, doesn't she?"

"Yes, but—" She broke off as Bill Carter came up.

Carter, blond and good-looking above his gleaming shirt-front, grinned at Hale, and said hello and what about a drink.

"Is Lyda nearly ready?" Marion Powell asked.

"Just about. She's down to her last stack."

In the room across the hall was a modernistic bar and a buffet well laden with cold cuts and chafing-dishes. They moved up to the bar, where Carter and Hale ordered Scotch and sodas and Marion directed the making of a short one. They were still standing there when Lyda Allenby entered, moving up to the bar and asking for a brandy and soda before turning to speak to them.

"How did it go?" Hale asked.

"Very quickly." Lyda's voice was brittle, jerky, her mouth petulant. When her drink was ready, she lifted the glass in a careless gesture. "Well—my swan song." She laughed a little bitterly and, catching Hale's eyes

over the top of the glass, said, "I'll have to leave him to you. Here's luck."

Like most sisters, Marion and Lyda had little in common. Lyda was tall, dark, and superior, with a classic, somewhat fragile type of beauty made even more striking by the artistry of her make-up. Her dark red strapless gown clung sleekly to a body kept slender and willowy by constant attention and massage. Hale had an idea she spent a lot of time on that figure, but it was worth it. Beside her, Marion looked a little heavy, a little bulky, and a lot more healthy. He knew you could not be cheated if you caught her too early in the morning.

Presently Bill Carter said something about shoving off. They said their good-nights, and as Marion moved past him, she found a chance to squeeze his hand, her only way of wishing him success and showing how important his attempt would be to her.

Hale knew that Gene Gorham made a point of keeping strictly to a one-o'clock closing, it being his idea that there were never any complaints about his parties until they became so late as to be noticeable to the neighbors; and as he set out to find him, he ran into Adelaide Rankin in the doorway. An auburn-haired Amazon with a scarlet, softly drooping mouth, she wore a clinging gown of black velvet, designed especially to take men's breaths away and make them woman-conscious. She was acting as Gorham's hostess, and from the artificiality of her make-up one expected her to talk like something out of burlesque. But Adelaide had been under contract to one of the studios as a stock player and had been given diction lessons; when she spoke in public her throaty voice was well modulated, deftly ac-

cented.

"Hello, Mr. Hale," she said. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Very much. I understand this is your last week."

"Last week here. Gene wants to go to Florida."

"That shouldn't be hard to take."

Adelaide Rankin said it wouldn't, and Hale asked her where she was staying.

"On the floor below—5D." She eyed him with narrow-lidded and speculative approval. "Why don't you stop in for a drink some time?"

"I will," Hale said.

Gene Gorham was talking to a couple near the foyer entrance. Hale went over and stood to one side until Gorham excused himself and stepped up to him.

"Where can we talk for about five minutes?"

Taking Hale's arm, Gorham led him through the inner hall to the closed door at the end. Opening this, they moved into a spacious living-room connecting with a bedroom partly visible through the doorway.

"It looks as though you're doing all right here," Hale remarked as he dropped into a chair.

"I have to do all right," Gorham grinned, "to stay even. You've no idea what it costs to decorate a place like this and run it for two weeks."

Hale said he supposed not, and as Gorham went on to elaborate, he realized why the fellow was a success at his business. Tall, handsome, and smooth all over, he looked like something right out of *Esquire*. His double-breasted dinner suit of soft blue was a shade or two lighter than the conventional blue-black, and his slim height lent effectiveness to this elegance. A ready smile showed white, even teeth, and with his British accent and his frankly deferential manner, he had a low, confidential

way of talking, so that most women left his place just a little sore at their husbands.

"You've got some IOU's and some notes of Mrs. Allenby's," Hale said presently. "I understand you want five thousand for them."

Gorham's bland blue eyes clouded and he arched one brow in a deliberate, sardonic way. "She sent you?"

"I'm acting for her, if that's what you mean."

"I see." Gorham's brow dropped and he examined the opposite wall. "I hadn't really decided on a price."

"I understood differently," Hale said. "I think it's too much, but she wants to pay and I'm offering it."

Gorham regarded his manicured nails intently, pursing his lips judiciously while a half-minute ticked by in heavy silence. Hale gave him time to think it over. He was not at all sure of the man's reaction, and in the end he decided it might help some if he bluffed a little.

"Well," he said bluntly, "do you want the five thousand, or do I have to get them back the hard way?"

Gorham's quick scowl surprised him, and it took him an instant to realize the scowl was not for his benefit. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the painted blonde in a maid's uniform standing in the doorway.

"How many times," Gorham demanded heatedly, "do I have to tell you to knock before you come in here?"

The maid was already stammering an apology and backing from the room, and Gorham's annoyed stare remained fixed until the door closed. When he looked back at Hale, his tone was even and unruffled.

"The hard way? I'm afraid I don't quite know what the hard way is." He gestured idly. "However, I think five thousand will be satisfactory. I don't like to gouge any more than is necessary."

"Will you take a check?"

"No."

"You'd take it at the tables."

"I might. But this is different. Cash."

"You'll get it in the morning." Hale rose.

Gorham rose with him, saying, "I have something for her sister, too." Hale sent him a quick, hard stare.

Gorham smiled and went on hurriedly. "Oh, nothing like this. In fact, I'm going to make her a present. She may not look upon it as such, and she may not like it, but it will be a very great favor nevertheless. She's an exceedingly nice person and I feel I owe it to her."

Hale watched him steadily, puzzled somewhat by the enigmatic statement and undecided whether to answer or not. When Gorham did not look at him again, he went over to the door. There was a man standing just outside, a slight, pink-cheeked fellow, with octagonal-shaped glasses, who looked worried and was obviously startled to find himself so suddenly confronted.

"I'm busy just now, old boy," Gorham said before the man could speak, "and I haven't anything to say to you anyway."

The man flushed and avoided Hale's glance as he passed. "Well—when can I see you, then?"

"I don't know," Gorham said.

"I'm sure I could straighten it out."

Gorham made no answer, and Hale continued down the hall without looking back.

Chapter Three: ON THE FLOOR BY THE DESK

MARION POWELL snapped off the light at the head of the bed, put the book on the table beside the clock, and snug-

gled gratefully down in the covers. She had purposely kept herself awake in the hope that Max Hale might telephone her before he went to bed. Now her eyes were tired and scratchy, and she could not read any longer. She was still a little worried, but one thing comforted her. She was convinced that Lyda was through gambling—at least with Gene Gorham. She had been frightened tonight; going there for that last small fling in the hope of getting even was sheer bravado.

She lay there thinking for quite a while, so engrossed that when she heard the creaking on the stairs it startled her and made her catch her breath. Someone was coming up—stealthily—those two loose steps near the landing had given him away. She sat erect to listen better, aware now of the faint, tapping footsteps; hurrying, nervous footsteps that seemed to stumble a little.

She threw off the covers and quickly crossed the room in her bare feet. With her ear to the panel, the footsteps were more distinct, but they were going away and she turned the knob quietly to open the door a crack.

The long hall lay dim and shadow-filled under the single night light. Near the far end a moving shadow, darker than the rest, opened a door and some reflected light from within silhouetted Lyda Allenby's coat-wrapped form as she slipped silently inside. When the door closed, Marion let her breath come out, aware now that her body was stiff and her nerves taut. She put down the impulse to go to Lyda and ask where she had been. She was afraid to think about it. She did not, she decided, want to know. And in an effort to convince herself, she closed the door and walked slowly across the checkered yellow pattern the street light had sprayed up-

on the rug. The clock on the bedside stand pointed to 2:30, and as she sat down to stare at it she remembered they had come home with Bill Carter a few minutes before 1:00.

Lyda had come upstairs immediately. Bill had left within ten or fifteen minutes. She had not heard Lyda go out—probably because the radio had been playing while she undressed—and could not know how long she had been gone. Tormented by these thoughts, she sat there while the night breeze, swirling along the floor from the open window, chilled her body and made her conscious of the other, deep-seated coldness within her from the moment she heard the creaking of the stairs. Wearily, she crawled back into bed and lay there wide awake, staring vacantly at the ceiling until, a long time later, sleep came to drug her worries.

The ringing came to him as in a dream, shrilling louder and louder as it sliced into his sleep until, at last, he opened his eyes and found himself awake. He groped blindly for the telephone in the darkness and caught it up in time to cut the second ring in half.

When he answered, a low rough voice said, "Mr. Hale? This is the night watchman down at the Siddon Building. I think your office has been broken into. The door's open, anyway. I thought you'd like to know."

Hale mumbled his thanks and hung up. His mind was still a little fogged with sleep and he rolled over on his back to think about it. The room was cool and dark and quiet. The bed was comfortably warm and he lay wondering why anyone would break into his office. A prowler, perhaps, in search of anything he could get, or— He sat up as a quick new thought surged through

his brain and expanded vividly to disturbing proportions. There might be a very valid reason, he was forced to admit, and the quick pressure of the idea stung him to action.

He threw off the covers and swung his feet to the floor, pulling on the bedside lamp as he did so. The little traveling clock told him it was 3:20. He stood up, whipped his pajama top over his head, and tugged at the cord. As the trousers dropped he stepped out of them, a rugged, deep-chested man with powerful-looking arms and a flat hard stomach. Naked, he stepped into the bathroom, splashed cold water on his hands, face, and neck, gave his teeth a hurried brushing. His face was somber as he dressed, his jaw bulging a bit at the corners. When he had knotted his cravat, he stopped at the chest of drawers long enough to run a comb through his black hair and force it flat. The wallet, change, and keys he had dumped from his dress trousers, he now transferred to the brown tweed. He slipped on his coat and turned out the light, continuing to the living-room, where he got his hat and balmacaan from the closet.

Congress Street was dark and empty when Hale braked his roadster in front of the Siddon Building. At this hour the place was strangely still and the click of his heels echoed along the sidewalk like the rapping of a patrolman's nightstick. A single light burned dimly beyond the glass doors; above, rows of darkened windows stared vacantly at the street.

One elevator was open. The automatic mechanism had been switched on, and Hale stepped in and pushed the button marked 3. Light from the elevator spilled into the hall when the door opened, and the reflection was sufficient for his walk to his office. He tried the

knob with a gloved hand, found the catch was not even latched, and went in to snap on the overhead light.

Without waiting to examine the lock, he stepped toward the steel filing cabinet that stood in the corner behind Sue Marshall's desk. He had covered less than half the distance when he saw what he had been afraid of: the top drawer stood ajar. The locking device had been forced, the metal around it twisted and scarred.

Automatically he pulled out the drawers, found all but the top one empty. They had always been empty. In the entire year he had written but a few dozen letters from this office, and they were in the manila folder in the top drawer. The sealed envelope entrusted to him by Barclay was gone. He had seen Sue Marshall put it away—in back of that manila folder.

Although the thought which had started him from the apartment had warned him, now that he was brought face to face with reality his uneasiness gave way to a sullen anger that brought unpleasant lights to his dark eyes. He stood there, his hand on the drawer handle, the irony of the discovery rising above his anger to put a tight, mirthless smile on his lips. The first damn time he had ever had any reason to lock the filing cabinet—

He slammed the drawer and moved over to the door. Here, too, the lock had been forced, a simple matter since the frame was a flimsy affair and all that was needed was a bit of prying. Disgustedly, he pushed the door shut and went over to Sue's desk. Locating the telephone directory, he looked up a number.

"Hotel Fenside?" he asked presently. "Will you ring Mr. Barclay's room? Harold Barclay.... I know, but it's important." He stared morosely at the desk calendar as

he waited, and after a half-minute or so he said, "Thanks. Please connect me with the desk."

The desk clerk did not know Mr. Barclay and therefore could give no information as to whether he had been in or out of his room that night. He could not recall the man, but since one key was gone, and he did not answer the telephone, apparently he was still out.

"Apparently," said Hale irritably, and hung up.

He leaned back in the chair, lit a cigarette, and tried to figure out a reason for the robbery. He got one immediately, but he did not like it, so he kept on trying until he finally had to come back to his first thought and accept it. No one but Sue Marshall, Barclay, and himself knew about the envelope. That Barclay had broken in to steal it seemed obvious; and the reason was just as obvious and much more disconcerting: Barclay had become more seriously involved than he had intended. The only reason he could not come back to claim the envelope in the morning was that something had happened that would be in the newspapers, and he was afraid that Hale, upon learning the truth, might have other ideas. He put out the cigarette, snapped off the light, and went into the hall.

A fifteen-minute drive took him to the Charlesview, and when he had parked in front of the marquee, he strode through the entrance foyer into the lobby. The desk clerk nodded in his chair, only the top of his head visible. Hale moved into the elevator without waking him. At the sixth floor he stepped into the foyer, put his thumb hard against a mother-of-pearl button, and held it for several seconds. A glance at his watch told him it was now 4:30, and through the window at the rear of the foyer beyond the stairs the horizon was gray. Some-

where on the Cambridge side of the river a street light blinked desolately.

He turned to listen at the door. There was nothing to hear but his own breathing, and when he heard it he realized how hard he was listening and again rammed his thumb against the button, holding it there a full half-minute. After a short pause he repeated the pressure, trying the door with his right hand at the same time; then he wheeled and strode quickly toward the near-by stairway, taking the steps two at a time to the floor below.

There was some light here, and by keeping close to the doors he could read the numbers. Half-way along the corridor he came to a metal plate marked 5D. He pressed a duplicate of the buzzer on the floor above.

The second effort brought a faint sound of movement from within, and after a short wait the door opened about five inches and brought up against a chain bolt, making a narrow frame for Adelaide Rankin's face. There was more light behind her than in the hall, and Hale had to peer into it to see her; even then he could not tell much about her expression.

"Oh," she said shortly; then, doubtfully, "You're not drunk, are you?"

"No." Hale's tone was crisp, business-like. "I want to talk to you—about Gorham."

"Is—is something wrong?"

"I hope not."

There was a pause as Adelaide seemed to consider things. "Wait a minute," she said finally.

There was a faint rustle of silk as she turned away, and he waited just about a minute before she came back to unfasten the chain. As though sensing from his man-

ner that the reason for the call was of some importance, she waited for him to speak.

"Do you know where he is?" he asked as he stepped into the tiny entry beside her.

"Isn't he upstairs?"

Hale shook his head. "I tried the buzzer—for three or four minutes."

She eyed him a moment, a hint of suspicion in her glance. "Why?"

"Call it a hunch. I could get the clerk up, but there's no use making a fuss for nothing. I thought you might have a key."

They had moved into the lighted living-room by now, and he noticed that her eyes seemed strangely sharp and clear. She had put on an ivory-colored satin robe, caught loosely at the waist and disclosing an inch of trailing nightgown underneath, nothing at all in the V above it. Most of her make-up had been removed and he was struck by the comparative freshness of her skin. Her large brown eyes were dark in shadows, but somehow they did not look as though they had been recently drugged with sleep.

"I have." She hesitated, imprisoning her lower lip between her teeth. "Do you want me to go up with you?"

"It might be a good idea."

"Then I'd better put something else on."

He watched her move into an adjoining room and swing the door partly shut. He was still wondering how she could look so wide awake so soon, and as he moved farther into the room, glancing about and taking in each detail of the furnishings, he became aware of the smell of cigarette smoke. His senses were alert now, the certain intangible feeling of suspicion that had been feed-

ing on his thoughts for the past half-hour keyed to a sensitive pitch. It may have been this that made him single out the chair in the corner by the windows.

Standing beside a radio and a floor lamp, it was just a very comfortable-looking chair, the sort of one a person would choose when he wanted to relax with a book. However, it seemed that the very curves of the seat and back cushions had a freshly molded look, as though the form of a body had recently been imprinted on them and they had not yet had the chance to slip back into a more orderly position.

On impulse, he moved over to the corner, glanced at the chair. The ashtray, he saw, was filled to overflowing, and as his eyes touched the floor lamp he reached over and felt the light-bulb. It was still warm; quite warm.

"This is a fine time to go calling." Adelaide swept out of the bedroom smiling a little wryly, and he turned to join her. The satin negligee had been supplanted by a heavy chenille robe which she had buttoned around her throat, and he saw that she had substituted slippers for her downy mules. "It'll be nice if somebody sees us," she said as they stepped out. "Me parading around the halls like this with you."

"Do you care?" Hale asked.

"Certainly I care. Why shouldn't I?"

He did not answer her, and she grumbled a little under her breath as they climbed the stairs. "I'll tell you one thing," she said as she unlocked the door. "Gene will scream if he's sleeping and we come barging in on him."

"I'll talk him out of it."

"You can't talk me into the sleep I'm missing."

He made an automatic answer without knowing what

he said, because they were inside now, and the lights in the main room glowed brightly at the end of the foyer.

He walked straight through this room, glancing from side to side, aware that Adelaide was still talking, but not really hearing her. The air was stale with tobacco smoke, and from the bar came the slightly sour smell of liquor and food. Moving hurriedly now, he threw open the door at the end of the hall, taking two quick steps into the lighted room before he halted abruptly.

Behind him he heard the sharp rush of Adelaide Rankin's breath, the little scream quickly stifled to a gasp. Other than this he was aware of nothing but the crumpled figure stretched out at the foot of the desk in the corner.

He did not advance at once, but stood there letting his eyes travel about the room until they touched the small wall safe recessed in the paneling between the two windows; after that he moved up slowly to the body.

Gene Gorham lay on his back, the limp, unnatural spread of his arms and legs, the angled curve of one wrist, bearing the unmistakable trademark of death. He was fully dressed in the light blue dinner suit, but the trousers were strangely twisted, the shirt bulging and loosely tucked in, as though there had been some sort of struggle. The double-breasted jacket was open, disclosing the crimson smear upon the waistcoat and shirt; scattered red blotches stained parts of the jacket, giving a horrible, smudgy pattern to the entire area above the belt.

To note all this took but seconds, and then Adelaide Rankin had found her voice. In a husky whisper that seemed to come from a parched, stiff throat she said, "Oh, my God! No wonder he didn't answer. Poor

Gene."

Hale turned, saw the wide staring eyes, the pastiness of her cheeks. The front of her robe lifted and fell as she fought to breathe regularly.

He stepped up to her, said, "Snap out of it!" and gripped her arm hard.

She looked at him then, and he shook her a little, roughly. He could not be sure about hysteria and he took no chances. "Come on! Outside!"

"No."

She was a big woman, but he bunched his shoulder muscles and turned her about, not relaxing his grip until he had her in the hall. She went willingly when he turned into the bar, saying, "I'm all right, I'm all right," hoarsely. He found a bottle of brandy and uncorked it. "Pour us a drink," he ordered. "I'll be back in a minute."

Once again in the other room, he went directly to the body, dropping down beside it to examine it more closely. After a moment he caught sight of the piece of paper. Gorham had it in his fingers, clasping it so tightly that Hale did not want to risk pulling it out. From what he could see, it was nothing but a corner fragment of plain white paper, perhaps an inch along each side. After a moment of speculation he stood up, turning toward the safe. He saw as he approached that it was not shut, and with a handkerchief covering his fingers, he took the knob to open it wide. Inside there were two bankbooks; nothing else.

Trouble settled heavily upon him then. He tried to think; then tried not to when he found the process discouraging. Presently he shrugged the sag out of his shoulders and went over to the desk. Lifting the telephone, he asked for Police Headquarters.

Chapter Four: THE DEAD WIRE

CAPTAIN NOONAN of the Homicide Squad was a blunt, barrel-bodied man with gray hair, a bristling, gray-black mustache, and skin that could have been tanned into a durable grade of leather. Descending upon Gorham's apartment with Lieutenant Cody, a fingerprint man and photographer, and three plainclothes men, he had made a cursory inspection and when the Examiner's physician arrived at 5:30, he was ready for more details.

"All right," he said, moving up to where Hale sat on an arm of the sofa, "let's have it. All of it."

"All of what?" Hale said evenly.

"How you happened to find him, what you were doing here."

"I wanted to see Gorham. When he didn't answer the buzzer I went down and asked Miss Rankin about him. Frankly, I was a little worried—"

"Sure you were worried."

Hale had made a lot of friends at Police Headquarters and some of the precinct stations, but Noonan could not be numbered among them. Although no actual enmity existed between them, the blunt, pugnacious Captain had, on other occasions, made it plain that he classified Hale as a nuisance; confronted by his present openly scornful manner, Hale drew into his shell and marshaled his defenses. The account he gave was carefully expurgated. He realized the story sounded vague and unsatisfactory, but he had already made up his mind not to explain about Marion Powell, and for the moment he also passed up Harold Barclay.

Noonan laughed as he finished, an unpleasant grating

sound. He was an autocrat, Noonan; a good tough cop, jealous of his domain, resenting interference, contemptuous of anything he did not understand. Learning early in his career that strong-arm methods proved surprisingly effective in the majority of cases, he felt that any other procedure was, in the main, a waste of time.

"All right," he said. "And now we want to know why you had to see him at four o'clock in the morning."

"Someone broke into my office some time last night or this morning and stole an envelope out of my filing cabinet. I had reason to believe there might be some connection between that theft and Gene Gorham. I came up to find out."

"What was in the envelope?"

"I don't know. It was sealed."

"Yeah? Then how'd you know there was a connection? Who gave it to you?"

"A client."

"Who?"

Hale met Noonan's angry stare with steady eyes. There was no very good reason why he should not reveal Barclay's name, but Noonan made him sore; he didn't like his attitude, and he didn't intend to be bluffed by loud talk and official threats. "He was a client," he said flatly.

"Listen." Noonan's brows twitched above his stormy eyes. "Who the hell do you think you're kidding? Client! You never had a client in your life. I know all about you. You got a private license, sure; but you're about as much of a dick as my little girl. You're one of those playboys, huh? Well, don't get the idea that just because you got money, and a little drag here and there, you can give me the run-around. You're gonna tell me about that cli-

ent, all about him, and—"

"Am I?" Hale cut in curtly. "Well, maybe I am. But not until I have to, and I don't have to now." He stood up, the front of his coat touching Noonan, his bright, dark eyes smoldering. "What do you think of that?"

Noonan's neck got red, and the flush went up into his jowls. For a moment Hale thought he was going to swing on him, and it was Lieutenant Cody who spoke up to avert the clash. Clearing his throat loudly, Cody said, "That clerk is out here now."

Noonan hesitated, dropped his glance, brought it back, and with reluctance turned away. His face was still red, his jaw set, as he glared about the room. In the end he gave his attention to the Examiner's man who was rising from beside the body.

"Tell him to wait," Noonan said; then, "What about it, Doc?"

"Right over the heart. Just once. I'll have to give you the bullet later."

"How long ago?"

The doctor shrugged. He looked like a prim little man, but his voice was brusque, incisive. "At least two hours. I'd say between one and three-thirty."

Noonan's grunt was edged with contempt. "A two-hour-and-a-half spread, huh? That's swell."

"We don't work out the time of death by mathematical formula, Noonan," the doctor snapped. "And if we did, it wouldn't be at a preliminary examination."

"Yeah, but hell—"

"There's also," the doctor went on, "a rather severe contusion on the back of the head."

"Could he have got it when he fell?" Cody asked.

"He could have, but I doubt it."

"Maybe somebody slugged him," Cody mused. "It would tie up with the open safe."

"It was opened by the combination," Noonan argued.

"He could have been forced to open it—afterward."

"Maybe." Noonan scowled at nothing, took from his pocket the little piece of paper that Hale had seen in Gorham's clenched fist when he found him. "Maybe," he said again. "But give me the rest of this sheet of paper and I'll give you the killer. Whoever yanked it out of his hand had a hell of a good reason." He glanced suspiciously at Hale, put the paper away and shrugged off his thoughtful mood. "Get the clerk," he said.

Hale sat down on the sofa again and watched a plain-clothes man usher into the room a tousle-headed youth, who entered with a sleepy look and was instantly wide awake when he saw the body on the floor.

Noonan started right in on him. He found out his name was Joe Raymond and presently learned that the clerk remembered two men who had been looking for Gene Gorham before Hale arrived.

"How do you know?" Noonan demanded.

"Well, one of them came in about five after two, got into the elevator—"

"What makes you think he came to see Gorham?"

"The elevator's got a dial on it," Raymond said defensively. "I watched it and it came up to six. This is the only apartment on the floor."

"How long did he stay?"

"About five or six minutes."

In describing the man, however, Raymond was not much help. The caller was a tall, slender fellow, well dressed and sort of distinguished-looking. Raymond was sure he could identify him if he had the chance, but

beyond that he could offer nothing.

"Okay," Noonan said. "What about the other?"

"He'd been in before—earlier. He asked for Mr. Gorham then, so when he came back I recognized him. I didn't see him until he stepped into the elevator. I tried to stop him, but it was too late."

"Too late?" Noonan said. "For what?"

"For Mr. Gorham. He'd just gone out."

"He what?" Noonan stepped closer. "He went out?"

"Sure. This guy must've just missed him."

"What time was that—when Gorham went out?"

"Twenty after two."

"Looked at the clock, did you?"

"Yeah. Because I thought it was kind of funny."

"Speak to him?"

"No. He looked kind of high and I thought I'd better keep my nose out of it."

"You're sure about it?"

"Positive. He had those blue pants on and that black hat and that black coat he wears; I'd know it anywhere —it's short and flares out almost like a cape. He was weaving a little, like he wasn't sure of his feet, and singing to himself." The clerk gave a hollow chuckle. "He was singing the words of *Home on the Range,* but he was so far off key I knew he was drunk."

"Twenty after two, huh?" Noonan echoed, and turned to the doctor, who was now putting on his coat. "What do you say to that, Doc?"

"What I said before—between one and three-thirty."

""You mean between two-thirty and three-thirty."

The Examiner's man didn't even bother to answer. "You can probably have a complete report this afternoon," he said, and went about packing his bag.

Noonan scowled, spoke thoughtfully. "The first guy comes in at five after two, stays a few minutes, goes out, and about ten minutes later Gorham goes out too. Then this second guy missed him—" He turned back to the clerk. "What did he look like, this second guy?"

"He was about medium size, around twenty-five or six; kind of quiet and—oh, yes, he had funny-shaped glasses."

Hale listened to the description of those glasses and a mental picture blossomed, making him quite sure that the man was the same one who had interrupted the tail end of his conversation with Gene Gorham earlier in the evening, the man who wanted to come back and talk to him and who had said things could be straightened out. As he weighed the connection, his thoughts slid off on a tangent and the sudden thrust of a new idea brought him to his feet.

Very casually he strolled across the room, reaching the doorway before Noonan spotted him.

"Where d'ya think *you're* goin'?" he challenged.

"For a drink." Hale gave him a bleak smile. "Want me to mix you one, too?"

Noonan said sourly, "Just don't go away."

In the stale-smelling room down the hall Hale found Scotch, poured some into a glass, and added a little water. With the drink in his hand, he peered into the hall; then moved swiftly into the front room, crossing it when what he sought escaped him, and continuing until he reached the entrance foyer. Here he found a telephone, and he was about to use it when the outer door opened and two white-jacketed ambulance men came in bearing a stretcher.

He waited until they passed before he gave his num-

ber. "Listen, sweetheart," he said when a sleepy voice finally answered his ring, "will you do something for me?

"Of course," Sue said. "Is—is anything the matter?"

Hale said he was afraid so, and without speaking of the murder, told how the sealed envelope had been stolen from the filing cabinet. "But don't worry about that now," he added. "All I want you to do is go down to the office and wait for me. I just want to be sure nothing happens to those two cards you made out for Miss Powell and Barclay—or that promissory note."

He met the ambulance men as they recrossed the front room with their stretcher and its blanket-covered burden. The Examiner's man was a few paces behind, and Hale stepped a little in front of him so that he had to slow down. "I'd like to ask a question," he said, pacing the doctor. "How soon would you say Gorham died after he was shot?"

"Very soon. A minute. Three or four, maybe. They seldom live much longer with that kind of wound."

Hale's face was thoughtful, his eyes narrowed as he watched the doctor continue through the foyer and leave the apartment. Although still smoldering from his clash with Noonan, he did a lot of thinking as he moved back across the room. Two or three little things did not fit in with other information that apparently was unassailable. He batted the whole thing around in his mind as he walked down the hall, but when he could find no conclusive answer, he gave up and strolled idly back into the room where the pugnacious Captain was still holding forth with the desk clerk.

"So you didn't see Gorham come back at all, huh?"

The clerk said he didn't, and Hale said, "That doesn't

prove anything; he didn't see me come in, either."

"You," Noonan said, whirling and jabbing his forefinger through the air, "keep your yap shut!"

"If you say so."

Hale spoke with taunting indulgence, and when he had polished off his drink, he leaned back on the sofa and listened to Cody question the clerk, noting with approval the deft way the Lieutenant got the information that the clerk took cat-naps when he could, that he frequented the men's room to stretch his legs, have a smoke, and occasionally take a nip to pass the time. Before Cody finished, it developed that one of these excursions to the men's room had taken place shortly after the man with the funny glasses had left.

"So that for a period of several minutes," Cody said, "anybody could have come in or out and not been seen?"

"Not by me," Raymond said.

"And Gorham could have come back then," growled Noonan, "or later. And there are other doors and stairs. A dozen guys could've come up to this floor. Gorham could've been stuck up outside a few minutes after he left and brought back, made to open the safe. Hell, from the looks of his clothes he might even been drilled outside."

"I don't think so," Cody said. "I looked at his coat"—he went over to a chair near the door and held up a distinctive-looking black dress coat that was shorter than most and had flaring skirts—"and with that kind of a wound there'd be blood on it."

Noonan stared at him a moment, said, "Yeah," gruffly. "All right," he added to the clerk, "you can beat it. Get his address, Carney," he directed a plainclothes man, "and then go down and bring up the dame."

Noonan went out with the clerk and Carney, and Lieutenant Cody came over to stand in front of Hale. Measured by the popular conception of a policeman, Cody was a disappointment. In his early thirties, he was a well-set-up man with a look of competence and dependability in his rectangular face. There was a certain polish to his manner and his dress that made him look more like a successful young businessman than a policeman. Constant association with criminals had not yet stamped him with obvious surface hardness, but that quality was there, in the corners of his eyes, in the scarcely noticeable tightness of his mouth. The very casualness of his methods suggested that he could be tough when he had to be.

"Have you really got a client?" he asked dryly.

"Certainly," Hale answered, grinning a little because he had known Cody quite a while and liked him.

"Then why not give us a little help?"

"I'll give you all the help I can. But Noonan—"

"He's all right," Cody said. "It's his job, isn't it? There'll be a stink about this and he knows it. He may be a little tough, and I can see he's not the kind of guy to handle you; and you're not helping it any. He knows a run-around when he sees one. Who is this guy anyway? Why do you have to cover up for him?"

Hale considered all this and knew that Cody was right. As far as he could see, he owed no further obligation to Barclay. It looked very much as if the man was playing him for a sucker. He did not like it, and he would prefer to have the chance of settling up personally; since that did not seem likely, he knew he would eventually tell the police all he knew about the man. But there was one other thing. He was more worried

than he cared to admit about the IOU's and letters Marion Powell had asked him to get. She was one client that had to have protection, and he wanted to consider all the angles before he spoke. Adelaide Rankin came in with Noonan before he could say more to Cody, and Hale rose and waited for her to be seated.

She was dressed now, quietly composed, and she smiled a little at him as she sat down, arranging her full, rounded body in a comfortable position and keeping her eyes from the stain on the rug.

"When did you see Gorham last?" Noonan asked.

"Just after one o'clock."

"Tell us about it."

"Well—" She hesitated, pulling painted lips into a thoughtful pout. "Gene always closed the place promptly at one. By ten after, everyone had left—that is, all the guests. So I left, too. He was standing in the gambling room talking to the cashier and one of the croupiers."

"Just what was your—ah—status here, Miss Rankin?" Cody asked politely.

A trace of a smile touched her eyes. "I guess you'd call me a hostess. Mr. Gorham thought it was a good idea to have a woman around. Lots of men came alone and—well, you know how it is. I was somebody to talk to and"—she arched a brow at him—"drink with."

"How long have you been with him?"

"Nine or ten months."

"Here?"

"In England first—London. We were six months there, and then we came here."

"Paid you a regular salary?"

"Oh, yes."

"But you're not English," Noonan said flatly.

"No. But I was there when I met him."

"Get back to the time you left. What happened after that?"

"Why—I came to my apartment and went to bed."

"Any callers?"

Without appearing to hesitate, she gave Hale a fleeting impression of her uncertainty before she dropped her eyes and said, "No. Not until Mr. Hale came." She went on to tell what had happened, and Noonan said:

"So you came up to look around just because Hale asked you."

"He was—well, pretty insistent. I thought I'd better."

Noonan asked several more questions along the same line, throwing an occasional irritable glance at Hale, who ignored them, but listened closely to everything that was said. Seeing that he was getting nowhere, Noonan changed his tack. "Who opened the safe?"

"Why"—her eyes widened—"I don't know."

"What did he keep in it?"

"I don't know."

"Certainly you know," Noonan snapped.

She straightened, serious and solemn. "I beg your pardon."

That stopped him and he had to try again. "I mean, you know if he kept money in it, don't you?"

"Yes, he kept money in it. Whatever was taken in each night was put there until morning."

"What else. Did he keep any accounts?"

"You mean IOU's? Things like that? Yes, I think he did, but I don't know where he kept them."

Noonan kept plugging away for several minutes, and to Hale it seemed that Adelaide Rankin was doing an

excellent job of answering. She never lost her poise. She was quite calm, more reserved than he believed was natural; and although he could not be sure, it seemed to him that she was trying to give the impression of complete helpfulness, and at the same time being quite careful to give very little information.

"All right," Noonan growled at last, and with a jerk of his head dismissed her.

Still gracious and unruffled, she rewarded them all with a faint smile and swept out of the room, leaving Noonan to grate his teeth and turn to Cody.

"We'll have to start from scratch. Get some men up here and search the place, everything. Get ahold of the help, all of them. Put the screws on and find out what they know. By that time we'll know what we got for fingerprints. As for you"—he leered at Hale—"don't get the idea you're gonna get away with this client gag. You're not even in the clear yourself; you're mixed up in this some way and—"

"You're damn right I'm mixed up in it," Hale said harshly. "And I'm going to stay mixed up in it until I finish a job I started." He moved to the door, turned to face Noonan. "As for being in the clear, any time you've got enough on me to arrest me you'll make the pinch—and I know it. So don't start throwing your weight around, telling me what I'll do and what I won't do."

"You'll talk plenty before I finish!"

"Sure. But I know my rights, and I know my client's rights. I may be a lousy detective, but I've got a license that gives me certain privileges, and I've got enough legal knowledge to know it."

"Okay, okay," Cody said. "Take it easy. Nobody wants to shove you around. We've got a job to do and

we want all the help we can get."

"Beat it!" Noonan ordered. "But I'll want to see you later on. Come down to my office or I'll send for you."

"Do that," said Hale.

He went down the hall, heels pounding, still burning from Noonan's offensive manner, and angry with himself for letting Noonan make him angry. At the foyer telephone he called his office, and when he heard the click of the lifted receiver at the other end he said, "Thanks for getting down, Sue. Is everything all right?"

The voice that came back to him was shrill and frightened. *"Oh,* Max—"

He stiffened under the sharp, pleading urgency of her tone; then the voice was silenced with a fearful suddenness that hit him like an icy deluge, leaving him tense and helpless. He heard one more muffled sound while he yelled, *"Sue! Sue!"* and then the finality of the sharp click in his ear told him the line was dead.

He rattled the receiver bar with hard, jerky thrusts of his fingers. When the operator answered, he repeated the number. Once again he heard the distant ringing of the other instrument. He counted it six times before he finally hung up.

Chapter Five: SLEUTH OR NOT?

SUE MARSHALL sat disconsolately at her desk, her elbows propped on the top, heels of her hands pillowing her chin. Her eyes were dry now, but around them the skin was red and puffy. Her face was tear-streaked, and she had not bothered to fix it. She looked up as Hale entered, watching him as he came quickly to her desk.

"You're all right, aren't you?" he asked anxiously.

She nodded without removing her hands.

"They got them, huh?"

She moved quickly, leaning back and looking down, but he saw the moist film through her lashes.

"It's okay, Sue," he said.

"Oh, if I'd only come sooner," she choked. "I might have had a chance to hide them or something. It's the only time you've ever asked me to do anything and now—" She yanked out a wadded handkerchief, tried to tuck it under her glasses, finally took them off.

"Forget it," he said gruffly. "It's not your fault. It was swell of you to come down. I should have called you before. Come on, now." He took the handkerchief away from her and gave her the one from his breast pocket. "Blow your nose and let's see where we stand."

He knew pretty well where he stood, but the crisp, business-like manner was a good antidote for tears. After she had blown her nose he saw that she was paying attention.

"Who were they? Cops?"

"They looked like it."

"What happened?"

"They were standing in the hall—two of them. I didn't pay any attention until they followed me in. Then one showed his badge and said he'd have to search the place. I tried to stop them, but one of them held me. When the other saw the dates on the two cards he said he'd have to take them along. Then the phone rang. They took it away from me and hung up. I'm sorry if I scared you. It was too late then anyway, but I was so—"

"Sure, I know," Hale said. "They took that promissory note too, huh?"

She nodded and looked away, finally stealing a glance

at Hale. His face was grim and flushed at the cheekbones; a tiny vein pulsed visibly under the skin at one side of his forehead and there was an ugly look in his dark eyes.

"I'll get them back." But even as he spoke he knew that the damage had been done. With his anger at Noonan's tactics there was mixed a dull sense of weariness and discouragement that came from his thoughts of Marion Powell and the mess he had made of the job. She had entrusted him with a confidence, and it was his failure to justify her trust that rankled so bitterly.

"I'll get them back," he said again. "And you'd better get some breakfast. You can have this lock fixed if you feel up to it, and then you might as well go home. There won't be anything to do here today—or probably any other day." He gave an abrupt, hard chuckle. "Sit around kidding myself for a year and when I do get a chance I muff it. The Hale Agency, huh? Well, one thing I'll guarantee: I won't let anybody else down. We'll close up the damn place before—"

"You will not!"

Hale blinked, surprised at the biting interruption.

"Don't you talk like that." Sue was practically shaking her finger at him. "It wasn't your fault. It could happen to anyone. And you still have to get those letters; you told her you would."

A quick, honest grin tempered his surprise. He was amazed that with her glasses off her hazel eyes were so clear and fiery, and he was ashamed for voicing his thoughts. Conscious of the warm glow in his breast at this unaffected display of loyalty, he wanted to go up and slip an arm around her shoulder, tell her he was lucky to have someone around who had enough faith in

him to bawl him out.

Since he was not sure she would understand, he just said, "Sure. We'll get the letters."

"And," said Sue, a little indignantly, "you haven't told me yet why the envelope was stolen last night, or how you knew someone might come for the cards."

"That's right, I haven't," Hale said, and sat down on the edge of the desk to tell her what had happened.

Hale went to Police Headquarters immediately upon leaving Sue, and when he found that Captain Noonan had not returned, he killed an hour and a half by going home for a shower and a shave, and some breakfast. When he returned the second time, he found Lieutenant Cody pacing the hall in front of Noonan's office.

Cody took one look at the dark, glowering expression on Hale's face, read the storm signals, and stepped in front of him, bracing himself and taking one arm.

"Now wait a minute," he said.

"I'm going to punch that big nose of his."

"Sure," Cody said, "and won't that be nice!"

"What the hell does he think he's doing? He can't—"

"Okay. He was out of line. So what? The point is he's got the information and you can't stop him from using it. There's no use starting a war about it now."

"And what does that make me? A client is entitled to some protection."

"You weren't exactly helpful, you know," Cody reminded him.

"I would have been with anybody but Noonan. Where is he?"

"He's not in here now, but come in and sit down." Cody opened the door, waited until Hale dropped into a chair. "Now for Christ's sake cool off," he pleaded.

"You'll get your stuff back."

"You're damn right I will."

Cody lit a cigarette and decided to try a little silence. He had known Max Hale for quite a while, had met him first when he was at the Milk Street Station and Hale was a reporter on the *Star*. They used to drink beer together, and Hale had taken him to several fights. Even then he had known about Hale's interest in crime, his unquenchable curiosity about police procedure and practice. It was no great surprise when he pulled some wires and took the course at the State Police Academy, and although it seemed something of a paradox that a man in his position should take out a private detective's license, Cody could understand it. Now, recalling the things he knew and the things he had read in the papers, he was willing to admit that this man was equipped to do almost anything.

He remembered, for instance, that Hale had dropped out of college to spend a year cruising the Pacific on a 50-foot ketch, that he had come back to get his degree and then spent several months on a tramp steamer before going to England for a year at Cambridge. After another year at Harvard he had been admitted to the bar, only to start work on the *Standard* as a cub reporter at $20 a week. He had, Cody knew, been fired regularly, from one paper and another, but all in all he had had two years' experience, training that was valuable in many ways.

Even so, he was still an enigma. He spent money easily and had plenty to spend; he liked a good time, knew every head waiter and night-club doorman in town. His clothes were beautifully tailored and with his brawny good looks he made the sort of figure that women—and

men who knew the difference—looked at twice when he entered a night club or a hotel dining-room. Yet for all his polish and background he had, at times, a definite surface hardness and a tough way of talking, as though he was ashamed of the million dollars he had inherited and wanted to prove he was a bum at heart, and that his right name—Maxfield Chauncey, at his mother's determined insistence—was a lie. Cody had an idea that a lot of this was pose, to cover up any sentimentality that might crop up; he also had an idea Hale would be a nice guy to have on your side when the going got tough.

He finally mashed out his cigarette just as familiar footsteps thudded in the hall outside. He got up to say, "Now take it easy will you? I've troubles enough."

Hale looked over at him. His anger still smoldered, but he had it under control now. He had sense enough to know that Cody was right, that Noonan held the cards and he could only go so far. He nodded at the Lieutenant, giving him a tight little grin.

Noonan entered with a business-like rush, checked himself as he spotted his visitor, then completed the entrance. "Well," he said gruffly, "I was just going to send for you."

"What the hell do you mean," said Hale morosely, "by breaking into my office?"

"Huh?" Noonan said innocently.

"You know damn well you can't use that stuff. You couldn't introduce it as evidence in a million years."

"Oh, that," Noonan said blandly. "Yeah, the boys shouldn't have done that. I had to bawl 'em out for it when I found out. You want those cards back?"

He stepped to the desk, opened a drawer, and took out two cards and the promissory note. Hale flashed him

a disgusted glance and was not misled by the unnatural passiveness.

"And how about the photostats you had made?"

Noonan ducked that one as he pulled out his chair, and Hale knew he was licked.

"Now"—Noonan's voice got crisp and aggressive again—"let's have it—and skip the argument." When Hale just stared at him, Noonan bent his brows and said, "We've got a fair case against you already and—"

"Have you?" Hale smiled, unimpressed. "Let's hear it."

"Miss Powell came to see you yesterday afternoon and borrowed five thousand, or wanted you to advance the money to buy back something from Gene Gorham. You went there last night and offered him five thousand for something and told him if he didn't come clean you'd get the stuff the hard way."

Hale's eyes showed surprise in spite of himself. "How do you know?"

"A maid overheard the threat."

Remembering now, Hale said, "That's right, she did. Okay. Then what?"

Noonan spread his hands. "You came back, tried the hard way."

"At four-thirty."

"Between one and three-thirty. You knew you didn't have an alibi—you haven't, have you?"

"Nope."

"So you came back a second time—with that phony routine with the Rankin dame, to make it look good and to have another chance to cover up."

"I made him open the safe," Hale said solemnly. "You forget that part."

"Maybe you did." Noonan got pinkish. "Maybe you did. A jury would think so because you'd have to force him to open the safe to get what you wanted." Noonan pushed back in his chair and folded his hands across his frontal mound. "What do you think of it?"

"Not bad," Hale said approvingly.

"And now"—Noonan jerked forward in his chair—"I want to know about this guy Barclay."

"You'd better tell us, Max," Cody said.

Hale looked at him, then back at Noonan. "I guess you're right. Not because I have to, understand?—but because I don't like to be played for a sucker and then take the rap for it."

In short, clipped sentences he explained the details of Barclay's call. He answered questions freely, gave the hotel address and a description of the man as well as telling about the phone call from the night watchman.

"When I called his hotel and found he wasn't in, I got the hunch that Gorham—since he'd been in London fairly recently—might be the fellow he was looking for. I went up to see and found out I was right."

Noonan and Cody exchanged glances, and during the silence Hale pulled out a cigarette and tapped it.

"So now you know that Miss Powell had nothing whatsoever to do with the job."

Noonan did not like this information; he did not like it at all. He stood up, kicked his chair out of the way, walked over to the window and came back, his mustache twitching. "A hell of a fine time to tell us," he snorted, glaring down at Hale. "I've got a damn good notion to throw you in as an accessory. Look at the start the guy's got—if there is a guy. Why, damn it all—"

He broke off as a plainclothes man opened the door.

"Those people you sent for are in Room 44."

"All of 'em?"

The man nodded. "Mr. and Mrs. Allenby, Miss Powell—"

"Mr. Allenby?" Noonan said, sounding surprised.

Hale jumped up, eyes blazing. "Listen," he raged, "I just got through telling you Miss Powell had nothing to do with it."

"That's what you say," Noonan said. "But there are things you don't know, see? And we don't know there is any Mr. Barclay. That story sounds phony to me—"

"But that's it, I tell you. Miss Powell is my client and you can't use the things you got from my office in front of those people."

"Can't I?" Noonan said thinly, pushing his face up close to Hale's. "Tell them I'll be right in," he said over his shoulder.

Hale wanted to lash out at him, to shout and kick and let his rage have a free hand. He knew that if Stephen Allenby was in that room, the truth would come out, and he restrained himself now with a tremendous effort because he wanted to be on hand for the showdown. If he was to be through as a private detective before he even started, he could at least face the consequences.

"You can come in," Noonan was saying with a sneer, "and protect your client if you want. But get smart and I'll throw you out."

"You mean you'll *have* me thrown out," Hale said.

Chapter Six: A SUBSTITUTE BUTLER

NUMBER 44 was a small conference room, simply furnished with a yellow oak table, matching chairs, two

glistening brass cuspidors and a lot of ashtrays. Lyda Allenby, Marion Powell, and Bill Carter were seated at one end and corner of the table when Hale entered the room behind Noonan; Stephen Allenby, who was looking out the window, faced about immediately.

Cody shut the door and Noonan put on his most deferential manner as he came forward. He said, "Good morning," almost too pleasantly and expressed his appreciation of their kindness in coming.

"I'm Stephen Allenby," Allenby said, advancing. "You didn't ask for me, I know, but I thought it best to come along with Mrs. Allenby."

"Of course," Noonan beamed. "I'm glad you did."

Hale said hello to everyone, not missing the curious look Marion Powell gave him. When he sat down he was practically speechless with rage. He saw now that what he feared most was going to happen. Noonan was going to question Marion about her promissory note, and with Allenby here, apparently having returned sooner than had been expected—

"Maybe this'll be a little awkward," Noonan began, "but a murder has been committed and we've got to get at the facts. I'll get this business over just as soon as I can —if you will co-operate—and then maybe it won't be necessary for anything we say here to go beyond this room." He smiled around the table. "You can see there's no stenographer. This is merely an informal attempt to get some information that—"

"You think that Mrs. Allenby—or her sister—knows something?" Stephen Allenby cut in stiffly.

While Noonan hemmed and hawed, Hale studied Allenby and knew he would be difficult. A tall, slender man with a finely chiseled face and a sensitive mouth,

he had a rather narrow, high forehead, the gradual retreat of his thinning hair accentuating this and making the face itself even more distinguished-looking. Beneath this proud, patrician mask there was, Hale knew, an intense feeling of family and honor, a native shrewdness proved by his business record. Now there was a challenge in his gray eyes, in the brittleness of his quiet voice; and Hale got the idea that, deep down, Allenby was a man who would never shirk his duty, who would take whatever measures were necessary to protect the things he valued.

Having pacified Allenby somewhat, Noonan turned to Marion Powell, saying, "You called on Mr. Hale yesterday, I believe, and hired him to do some work for you. What was the nature of that work?"

"She doesn't have to answer that," Hale said.

Noonan bristled, but tried to ignore the interruption. "You gave him a note for five thousand dollars—we have a copy of it here, and we happen to know that Mr. Hale made Gene Gorham an offer of five thousand dollars last night. We don't know just why but—"

From the very first sentence Hale had been aware of Marion Powell's eyes. He had to look at them finally, and their icy contempt made him hot and uncomfortable. As soon as Noonan finished he spoke up. "As my client, I think Miss Powell is entitled to know how you have a copy of the card I made out in her name, and the note. Do you want to tell her how you got them or shall I?"

Noonan turned very slowly, keeping his lips together and getting purple in the face as he cut off his breath. He would have exploded on the spot, but he knew Allenby was watching him.

Hale gave him a pleasant surface smile, then turned it on Marion. "Two of his men took them from my secretary—by force. So don't worry about it. They can't be introduced as evidence, and you'll be quite safe in ignoring any questions that Captain Noonan asks you regarding them—or your business with me."

The frost went out of Marion Powell's eyes, and something that might have been admiration sparkled in their depths. Noonan was apoplectic, but before he could say anything, he had Stephen Allenby to contend with.

"I fail to see just what bearing Miss Powell's business with Mr. Hale has on the case," he said evenly. "As you know, we were under no compulsion to come here. An investigation of this sort could be carried on to better advantage at my home—if necessary at all—and I'm surprised that you didn't suggest it." He inclined his head slightly. "As a matter of fact, the only reason I consented to bring Mrs. Allenby here is that I don't like to take the position that we are any better than anyone else or that we merit special privileges."

Noonan was bogged down badly and was groping for some answer when Cody came to his rescue.

"We appreciate that, Mr. Allenby," he said politely. "It doesn't matter whether Captain Noonan's questions are answered here or in your home—or in front of the grand jury. But it's important that we have those answers —some of them at least—and we intend to get them."

The calm matter-of-factness of Cody's statement left its impression on Allenby, and after a pause he turned to Noonan. "Suppose you get about it, then."

The breathing spell was all Noonan needed. When he began again, there was less deference in his tone, more of the blunt assurance that he usually adopted, and Hale

was surprised to see that he addressed his next remarks to Lyda Allenby. "You were at Gorham's place last night." It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

"Why, yes," Lyda Allenby said coolly. "With my sister and Mr. Carter."

"When did you leave?"

"About twelve-thirty." She glanced at Marion. "Wasn't it?"

Marion said she thought so, and Noonan said, "Then what?"

"We went home."

"But you came back later."

Hale sat up and held his breath. Noonan's tone had a ring of truth about it, and when he saw Lyda's reaction he was sure. Her chin came up in a haughty denial, but some of the color oozed out of her cheeks.

"I beg your pardon," she said icily. "You must be mistaken."

"You came back about two o'clock."

Allenby opened his mouth, then clamped it shut, fastening sharp gray eyes on his wife.

"No," Lyda said hurriedly. "No, I didn't."

"There's a light over the back entrance of the Charlesview," Noonan said, accenting his words. "Shortly after two o'clock this morning one of the janitors was going home and saw a woman come down the stairs and pass under that light. She was in such a hurry she dropped one of her gloves when she opened the door."

Noonan paused without relaxing his stare, and suddenly Lyda Allenby was no longer cool or poised or superior. Her face was chalky, the eyes frightened and wide. Her lips were parted, the upper one trembling an instant before she forced them together in an effort to

hide her fears in anger. "What rot!" she said contemptuously. "I haven't the remotest idea of—"

"The janitor saw her drop the glove and called to her. When she turned around he had a pretty good look at her. He thought it was funny she didn't stop." Noonan reached into his pocket and tossed a rather new-looking, fawn-colored glove on the table. "Mind trying it on?"

"Certainly she minds trying it on," Allenby snapped. His lean face was stiff, his mouth unpleasantly tight; he could not keep his eyes off his wife.

"But it's so ridiculous," Lyda cried.

Noonan heaved a sigh and turned to Cody. "Get that janitor—looks like he'll have to tell her to her face."

Cody rose reluctantly and moved to the door. Lyda Allenby waited until he had his hand on the knob.

"Wait!" she said weakly. "That won't be necessary. That's my glove, all right."

For the next few seconds no one spoke and the silence piled up heavy and oppressing to grip the room. Lyda kept her eyes on the table and rubbed one hand absently on the arm of the chair. Bill Carter just gaped at her. Stephen Allenby's face was like a gray, hard mask, and Hale sat very still and waited for him to speak. This is it, he thought; Allenby insisted on coming, and here it is.

In the end it was Lyda herself who broke the silence. As though she could not stand it any longer, the dammed-up words came out in a rush. "Suppose I did go back? What of it? I didn't see him."

"Why not?" Noonan asked.

"Because he didn't answer the buzzer."

"Why did you go back at all?"

"I—" Lyda stopped with her mouth open, made an-

other attempt, and just then someone laughed, a harsh, abrupt sound that jarred unpleasantly.

Hale had to look around before he realized the laugh had come from Marion Powell. She had a broad, fixed smile on her young face, and, as though it did not matter in the least, spoke in a flip, cool voice. "It's no good, Lyda. Thanks just the same. I never should have let you try it in the first place. Somebody got a cigarette?"

Bill Carter did not understand any part of the scene and he was too dumbfounded to pay any attention to the request. Hale stared right at her, his face screwed up in astonishment, and she stared right back at him with all the calmness in the world and said, "And thanks, Max, for trying to keep me out of it."

The act clicked in his mind then. To show it, he grinned at her and began fumbling for a cigarette; by that time Cody had one out and was striking a light.

Noonan looked from face to face, scowling a little, his expression faintly bewildered and annoyed, as though he sensed that something was going on that he neither understood nor liked.

"You see, Captain," Marion said as she inhaled, "Gene Gorham had some of my IOU's and—well, I'd had lunch with him a few times and had written him a couple of notes—"

"You what?" gasped Carter.

"Now, don't be a goose, Bill!" Marion ordered. "There was nothing wrong with it; nothing wrong with the notes, either. It wasn't you I was worried about anyway, it was Stephen." She looked over at him through narrowed lashes and took a flake of tobacco from her tongue with her little finger. "You are a rather stiff-necked old martinet, you know, Stephen. And toward

the end Gene was a little nasty. He wanted his money, and I didn't have it, and I didn't want him coming to you because I knew I'd be in for a lecture. I'll get it now anyway, but going to Max was a good idea." She glanced at Lyda. "And of course Lyda was more worried than I was. When I told her about it last night after we'd come home she insisted on going back to see Gene. How did she know that was the night he was going to be killed? She didn't see him, anyway."

She pushed back in the chair, her tanned face smooth and unworried, her dark blue eyes challenging to hide their anxiety. Hale had to admire her acid self-reliance, could not but respect the effort it took to accept the blame and lie so convincingly.

"So you see," she said resignedly, "this all seems rather silly. And stop sulking, Bill Carter! After all, we're not married, you know."

"I'm not sulking," Carter said. "But you might have come to me. I'd have collected your IOU's for you."

"Don't be childish, Bill," Lyda said, a note of false spontaneity in her indulgent assurance. "You're the last person she could go to for that sort of thing."

Carter slid glumly down in his chair, and Hale watched him a moment. He was a husky, vigorous-looking youth, not very tall, but broad-shouldered, with a clear, fair skin, straight blond hair, and, ordinarily, bland blue eyes. Hale had known him casually for a long time and recalled that his family came from New York and that he now worked for a State Street investment house. His grandfather had made the family money originally, in copper, but Bill's father had spent most of it before a heart attack caught up with him on a golf course. In disposing of the balance Bill had been thor-

ough, and his earlier exploits had made the newspapers on more than one occasion. There had been some trouble with a chorus girl or two while he was an undergraduate, his last escapade resulting in his dismissal from college. But he had followed Hale at Cambridge by three years, and since returning had behaved himself. With his engagement to Marion Powell his conduct had been circumspect, his early inclination to wildness buried with the past.

Remembering these things now, Hale had an idea that Carter and Marion Powell should hit it off well. They would fight, but they would get over it because, for all her impulsiveness and spunk, Marion was well saturated with common sense, and with her cleverness she would be able to handle the more obvious Carter. . . . He was suddenly aware that Noonan was speaking.

"Maybe this isn't quite as silly as you think." He was answering Marion Powell, but he was talking to the others as well. For a few minutes the interview had been taken from his hands, but it was apparent that he had no intention of forgetting his purpose in summoning them there. "You have given me a reason why Mrs. Allenby went back to Gorham's. But you didn't volunteer that information. You haven't co-operated much, any of you. And it's still murder we're talking about, don't forget that. Two of you, maybe three, had a motive to kill Gorham, and I'd like to remind you that a woman can pull a trigger as well as a man."

"See here, Noonan," Allenby said. "Unless you—"

"I'm giving you facts, Mr. Allenby," Noonan cut in, "not accusations. Frankly, I'm not satisfied with any of your stories, and although I'll have to accept them for the present I'll tell you this much: Mrs. Allenby's state-

ment that she went to Gorham's apartment and rang the buzzer and got no answer doesn't fit in very well with other information we have. . . . And Mr. Carter"—he moved his glance across the table—"I'd like to have an account of your movements too, if you don't mind."

"So now I'm a suspect," Carter laughed.

"Everyone is a suspect when I'm on a case," Noonan said grimly, "until I'm satisfied to eliminate them. There's a motive for you, too."

"I was jealous of Gorham, is that it?"

"Possibly. And you could have known about the notes and the IOU's for all we know."

"Okay," Carter said, flushing a little, "I'll make it short. I left Miss Powell at about one-fifteen."

"That's in Brookline?"

Carter nodded. "I drove nearly home"—he smiled with some exaggeration—"that's also in Brookline—when I remembered I was all out of Scotch. So I kept on going until I got to the Fox and Hounds Club. They know me there and gave me a drink—although I suppose now they'll lose their license for it—and I was there until about two-thirty. Why don't you check on it?"

"We will," Noonan said, holding his temper with admirable self-control. "And you haven't any alibi from two-thirty on?"

"No. Sorry."

"Thanks very much." Noonan stood up.

Marion Powell and Company had apparently won the first round on technicalities, but to Hale it seemed like a moral victory for Noonan. Noonan did not understand these people, and all of them, Allenby excepted, had laughed at him at one time or another. Throughout the interview he had fought to keep his

dignity, when what he wanted to do was shout and curse and pound the table. He held back until the others had filed out and then he steamed all over the place.

"A fine God-damned thing!" he raged. "Who the hell do they think they're kiddin'? Every damn one of 'em's a liar by the clock." He broke off to get a string of curses out of the way. "And me, I got to handle 'em with kid gloves, huh? Well, we'll see—"

The door opened to show a plainclothes man. He tried to duck out again, but Noonan yelled at him.

"I've got the butler that worked for Gorham," the man said, entering hesitantly. "I think he's got something that might help."

"Bring him in," Noonan ordered, and in a moment a gaunt, tired-looking man was ushered through the door. He had his hat in his hand and he waited awkwardly before Noonan's hostile gaze, his timid eyes searching for some sign of friendliness in the room.

A frown slashed across Hale's face and his eyes were doubtful; then, as his racing thoughts tumbled into place, the frown slipped away and his interest quickened sharply.

"Your name?" Noonan said.

"Gleason."

"You were Gorham's butler?"

"Yes, sir, but"—he turned the hat in his hands—"not last night."

"What d'ya mean, not last night?"

"I mean I let another man take my place."

"You what?" Noonan squinted at the man as though he were a mile away. He started to speak, looked at Cody, tried it again. "Start at the beginning."

"Well—I've been working for Mr. Gorham since a

week ago Saturday. I understood this was the last week, so when the man came and offered me a hundred dollars to let him take my place—"

"What man?"

"I don't know his name."

Noonan's eyes bulged and his blood pressure soared visibly. He walked stiff-legged around the table and forced his voice below a shout. "Go on," he ordered.

"The man said he wanted to look over the lay-out so he could get some ideas for a place he wanted to start. He said he couldn't get in any other way, but he knew how to buttle and if I'd fix it for him he'd pay me a hundred dollars. So I wrote a letter to Mr. Gorham and said I was sick, but that a friend of mine would take my place."

"But you don't know his name?"

"He said it was Jenkins, but maybe that was phony."

Noonan teetered on heels and toes and smiled dangerously. "But you didn't think it was phony he should give you a hundred bucks."

"Yes, I did," Gleason protested. "And I said, 'Now look here, if there's anything screwy about this I'm going to the cops.' But he said it was on the level, and Mr. Gorham used to pay me ten bucks a night, and that hundred would make a lot of difference to a man with a family, a man that don't work any too regularly."

"Oh, sure. You were coming right down and tell us—after we looked you up."

"That's because I didn't know about it. I'd just read about the murder in the paper when he"—Gleason indicated the plainclothes man—"came."

Noonan rubbed his red nose and gnawed the edges of his mustache; with a final glare of disgust at Gleason, he

turned to Cody. "Get a stenographer and have him repeat the story; then take him down to the gallery. Maybe this phony butler has been mugged; we might have his picture. You'd know him if you saw him, wouldn't you?" he growled at Gleason.

"Oh, yes. I'm pretty sure I would."

Noonan said that was just fine and slammed out of the room, avoiding further comment.

Chapter Seven: A BIG-NOSED GUY

HALE bumped his roadster between two parked cars about a hundred yards from the entrance to the Fenside and strode down the sunlit walk whistling softly through his lips. As he passed the taxi stand a foghorn voice called, "Hy yuh, Maxie!" and he turned to grin back at the freckle-faced driver who was saluting him.

"Hy, boy," he said. It was like that with Hale. Most of them knew him, and while he made no attempt to recall names, he always had an answer. Satisfied with this recognition, the driver went back to his newspaper, and Hale gave his attention to the blonde who had turned into the entrance in front of him.

She had splendid legs and he saw that the seams of her stockings were straight and trim. A snug-fitting coat played familiarly with the backs of her calves, and the easy natural swing of her hips was young and confident. He drew closer as they went through the quiet lobby, and she evidently became aware of the pounding of his steps because, just short of the elevators, she turned to glance over her shoulder. He smiled at her, and she started to freeze, thought better of it, and smiled back. Most women did. It was no act with Hale. He liked

women, and especially young women who knew how to dress. Never offensive, his grin was friendly and admiring, and women seemed to sense this and generally smiled back at his well-groomed good looks to show they were appreciative. This girl gave him a second sidewise glance of approval as they rode up and seemed a little disappointed that he did not get off with her at the fourth floor.

He began again to whistle softly as he started down the fifth-floor hall. He walked the entire length, turned left, and spotted the maid's flag standing in front of a near-by doorway. She came out at his knock and he smiled at her and asked her if she would let him into Room 526.

She was quite shocked at the suggestion until she noticed the ten-dollar note he was peeling off the fold of bills; then she became more doubtful.

"You don't need to worry," Hale said. "You can go in with me and watch. I just want to look around; the man who has the room is a client of mine."

The maid was short and dumpy and had dark fuzz on her upper lip, but she liked that smile; then too, there was the ten dollars. She said she didn't know, but she felt under her apron for her keys, and in the end she went farther down the hall and unlocked the door.

Hale stepped briskly through the tiny entryway, walked four feet into the room, and jerked to a stop as something caught the corner of his eye and yanked his muscles taut. When his head came around he was looking at a plump, round-faced man with his hat on the back of his head. In his hand was a snub-nosed revolver. It was pointed right at Hale's stomach.

The maid, a step behind him, sucked in her breath in

a gasping sound. Hale felt his heart start beating again, and a slow grin crooked the corner of his mouth.

The man lowered the gun, smiling sheepishly as he put it away. "It's all right, miss," he told the maid. "Only don't do it again."

"Yes, sir," the maid quavered. "I didn't know anyone was in here, sir," she said, and backed out in confusion.

"What the hell's the idea?" Hale asked indulgently.

Sergeant Flaherty, attached to Headquarters, Homicide, tucked the gun into its holster and patted the tail of his coat over it. "You tell *me,*" he said evenly.

"This guy Barclay's a client of mine. I wanted to look around." He spoke casually, as though it didn't matter, and kept looking as he spoke. "As long as you're here I don't suppose there's any use."

He started to turn toward the door, but Flaherty said, "You better wait. I got to report on this."

"For what?"

"I got a job to hang on to." Flaherty shrugged. "And you know Noonan."

He was at the telephone three or four minutes. He did not do much talking, except to explain that Hale was there, but he did a lot of listening, saying, "Yeah, okay," from time to time and getting a little pink at the ears.

"What did he say?" Hale asked when Flaherty hung up.

The chunky Sergeant took off his hat, passed a palm over his nearly bald pate. "He said, 'Throw the nosy bastard to hell out of there and tell him to keep his face out of this job before he gets it spoiled.'" Flaherty grinned. "And he sounded like he meant it."

"He's my pal," Hale said cynically.

Flaherty's grin dissolved into sadness and he shook

his head slowly from side to side. "Honest to Gawd, Max," he said reproachfully, "I can't figure you out. Maybe you ought to see a doctor."

Hale grinned at Flaherty's sad face and waited.

"A detective! I ask you. Ain't that a hell of a thing? Why? What for?"

"Until yesterday," Hale said, "it was just sort of an idea. Now I'm beginning to like it."

"But a *private* detective!" Flaherty was distressed. "Hell, you might as well study to be a pickpocket." His face got puckered around the eyes and he waved his hands. "If I thought my kid was growing up to be even a legitimate detective I'd beat his brains out."

"Ah," said Hale, "you love it."

"Love it?" Flaherty got insulted. "Why, if I had your dough and your education I'd—" He fumbled, found no appropriate expression, closed his mouth, opened it again, and said, "All right. G'wan, beat it!"

Still smiling, Hale said, "Okay," and left the room, but when he started down the hall he was no longer whistling.

On the way downtown Hale had to admit that he was not making much progress as a detective. He should have known that Noonan would have someone waiting for Barclay. He realized now that he could not hope to beat the police at their own game unless he had a head start; but in one line of investigation he thought he had that start. To find out, he drove to Nick Kelsey's gymnasium, mounted rickety wooden stairs to a low, stuffy room that reeked with arnica and the sour smell of perspiration, and picked his way past shadow-boxing maniacs to stop beside a small, shrewd-eyed man standing at one corner of the ring watching a couple of light-

weights work out.

He waved to a sports writer he knew, winked at the cigar-chewing manager of a local string of boxers, and touched Kelsey's arm, indicating that he wanted to speak to him.

"Hi, kid," Kelsey said agreeably. "When you comin' down and work out again?"

"Most any day now," Hale replied. "Who've you got that's good?"

Kelsey mentioned a couple of boys, and Hale drew him over to a window, away from the grunts and thudding fists, and out of range of the noisy staccato chorus of the half-dozen punching-bags in a row along the wall.

"I'm trying to find a fellow," he began. "All I know is that he used to be a welterweight. Must be thirty-eight or so now. I think Dan Segal managed him. Kind of a big-nosed guy, with a funny stoop; pretty near bald now. He might be a waiter, but I can't remember where."

"You mean Mike Kolb," Kelsey said. "Works for Lee Fonseca."

"At the Circle Bar?" Hale asked, mentioning a noisy but profitable night club run by a man who, in his spare time, was rated as one of the city's top gamblers. "Don't know where he lives, do you?"

Nick Kelsey shook his head. "Pete Frank, at the Circle, could tell you. Why don't you call him? Use the office phone if you want."

Hale thanked Kelsey and said he would.

Casalle Street was a dirty, two-block mistake, lined with thin, discouraged-looking brownstone fronts and occupied at the moment by a gang of moppets who

rough-housed all over the sidewalks and pavement with a football consisting of a leather cover stuffed with rags. Number 86, like its neighbors, was approached by tall, steep stone steps, and as Hale mounted them he could look down into an areaway apartment and see a tailor sitting cross-legged in the window. There were some mailboxes and name cards in the vestibule, and after a glance at them he went into a rancid-smelling hall and climbed up through the gloom to the floor above. He had already decided to use Fonseca's name if Kolb was at home, so when he knocked and a voice from within said, "Who is it?" he said gruffly, "Lee. Open up!"

He was ready when the lock clicked back. The door opened a foot or so—enough for him to see that his information had been correct, that this, indeed, was the man who had acted as Gorham's butler the night before —then, as a look of surprise flooded Kolb's slack-jawed face, he tried to close it.

Hale hit the opening with his shoulder. Kolb saw he could not hold out against this weight and sprang back quickly, whirling toward an automatic that lay on a table near the center of the room. Hale had kept his balance from the first, and he was nearly as quick as Kolb. He saw the gun, saw the fellow snatch it up and turn to meet him; by that time he was close enough. As the gun swung toward him he reached out and cuffed it from Kolb's hand, and, still moving in, slapped a left to the side of the face. It was not a hard blow, but his momentum was behind it. Kolb stumbled backward, fell over a chair, striking on his shoulder blades and tumbling the chair on top of him.

Hale picked up the automatic. "What's the idea of pulling a gun on me?" he asked resentfully.

"Well, what's the idea of busting in here?" Kolb picked himself up, righted the chair.

"I want to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to you, see? Go on, shove off!"

Hale shut the door, locked it. Without the livery, Kolb did not look much like a butler any more. A nondescript and poorly fitting suit seemed to exaggerate his peculiar stooping posture and his loose-looking face was dark and glowering. Hale saw that now there was something more than anger in the fellow's eyes. They could not keep still. They kept coming back to him, but most of the time they looked at other things in the room.

Kolb did not like the silence. "What the hell is this?" he growled. "You can't push me around. I've got friends to take care of me."

Hale said nothing, but he shifted his gaze and for the first time saw the coat thrown over the back of the chair, the two bags on the floor by the wall. One of these was a cheap-looking suitcase; the other was a black valise.

"Going out?" he asked casually.

"What if I am?" Kolb said belligerently.

"What've you got in the bags?"

"Nuts."

"You know the cops are looking for you, don't you?"

"What about it?"

"I thought maybe you'd rather talk to me. What's in the bags?"

"You go to hell!"

"Okay." Hale moved up to the bags. As he bent over, Kolb started for him. He straightened, gun in hand.

Kolb stopped. "You're not gonna shoot," he said.

"I don't think I am," Hale replied. "I'll just keep you from shooting."

He stooped quickly, lifting the suitcase and tossing it on the table. Kolb watched him paw through it, his face dark with rage. His brows were badly scarred by years of ring warfare and one of them twitched from time to time under the pressure of his nerves. He said nothing at all during this search, but when Hale reached for the valise he could no longer control himself. "Lay off!" he yelled.

Hale saw him lunge forward, and dropped the valise on the table. Kolb threw a quick left that was a little short, and swung a right. Hale moved inside so that the blow circled his neck; then, still holding the gun, he grabbed Kolb's waist and, turning sharply, spun him off balance. Without striking him, he pushed hard, jamming the man back into the chair.

Kolb bounced to his feet, took a step.

"Watch it!" Hale said curtly.

Kolb stopped. Hale outweighed him by twenty-five pounds and he must have realized from the way he was handled that here was a man who also knew how to fight. Impotent but helpless, he stood there with eyes blazing while Hale waited; then he went back to the chair and sat down. "Okay," he said grimly. "But don't get the idea you'll get away with it."

Hale opened the valise. Under a dirty shirt was a tangled mass of $10, $20, and $50 bills. There were a few checks, and when he had read the dates, he closed the valise and looked over at Kolb, his eyes bright with satisfaction.

"So you cracked Gorham's safe, huh?"

Kolb wasn't so blustery now. He had a cornered, shifty look in his eyes and his voice was jerky, vehement in denial. "You're off your nut."

"This is last night's collection. The check dates prove it." He went on crisply to tell about the story the regular butler had told at Police Headquarters. "And you got in as a butler," he finished, "to hijack the profits." He moved up. "Where's the rest of the stuff?"

"What stuff?"

"From the safe."

"I tell you I didn't crack it." Perspiration had come out on Kolb's forehead now and his eyes were trapped. "I wouldn't know how."

"You could have got the combination. You slugged him to get last night's cash; then you forced him to open the box. Before you left you drilled him." Hale didn't believe it himself, but he put the pressure on to get as much truth as possible. "Come on," he ordered finally. "Lieutenant Cody wants to see you."

"You can't do that," Kolb cried. "I don't know nothin' about the safe—or that killin'."

"It'll be easy to prove this is last night's cash," Hale argued. "The men who signed these checks will clinch that."

"You can't pin the rest of it on me." Kolb stood up, his tone desperate now. "Because I didn't do it, see."

Something about Kolb's manner, his denial, was convincing, and Hale watched him narrowly a moment, reaching for other answers to fill out this new angle. Suddenly he knew what the alternative was and made up his mind. A glance about told him there was no telephone and he said, "Get your coat."

"You can't pinch me," Kolb protested. "You ain't no cop."

"Get your coat. We're just going for a ride—down to Headquarters. After that it'll be Cody's job." He picked

up the valise, backed toward the door. "Come on, move!" he added. "Or do I have to drag you?"

He reached behind him as he spoke, unlocked the door while Kolb's frantic eyes darted about the room as though searching for some way out. When he finally gave in and picked up his coat, Hale opened the door carefully and started to back out. "Okay, Kolb," he said.

He saw the man's eyes widen as he took the first step. Before he could stop he backed up against something hard and round that hit him right in the spine.

"Okay yourself, pal," said a hard deep voice from behind. "Drop it!"

Hale went rigid. He still clung to the automatic, but a jab of the muzzle in his back forced him into the room, and when he saw he could not use it, he loosened his fingers, heard it thud against the carpet.

"Get it, Mike," the voice said.

Kolb darted forward to snatch up the gun, and Hale moved farther into the room, to turn and face a mountain of a man in a camel's-hair coat. There was a puzzled grin on his puffy, flat-nosed face, as though he was doing a lot of thinking and not getting anywhere.

"Good thing I stayed in the hall, huh?" he told Kolb. "I was just gonna knock when I heard the pow-wow. Who is this lug, anyhow?"

"I don't know." Kolb was putting on his coat and seemed to have but one thought in mind: flight.

"Well, what's the beef?"

"I'll tell you when we get out."

"Wait a minute," the big man argued. "Frisk him first."

Hale stood still as Kolb circled him and patted his pockets from behind. A crooked, sardonic grin twisted

his mouth, but resentment flickered in his dark eyes and the big man kept his gun level, taking no chances.

"He's clean," Kolb said, and went over to pick up the valise and suitcase.

The big man waited while Kolb made his exit, then backed to the door. He still had that puzzled expression, which might have been chronic, but there was no nonsense about his voice or manner. "Stick your head out, sweetheart," he said as he closed the door, "and I'll pop it off."

Hale grunted softly, cursed once at his ill fortune, and stepped over to look out the window at the street below. He lighted a cigarette as he waited. As he blew out the match, Kolb and his companion came out on the sidewalk and piled into a waiting taxi. It pulled out from the curb directly below, and when it reached a point where he could begin to read the registration, a coal truck rolled up behind so that all he could see was the final digit, which was 7.

"Do I get the breaks," he fumed angrily, and, muttering under his breath at the coal truck and its driver, crossed the room and went out.

Chapter Eight: THE IOU'S

SAM DELEMATER had an office on the third floor of one of those tired-looking walk-up office buildings in the Boylston Street district. A rug-importer had the ground floor, and above him were three beauty parlors, two lawyers, a stamp-collecting agency, a locksmith, and a dentist. Up among the vacancies on the third floor was Sam. The words on the door said: SAMUEL R. DELEMATER, *Detective Bureau.*

Hale knocked once and walked into a dingy-looking cubby-hole that was musty from age, a little moldy around the woodwork, and graced by the presence of a skinny, sharp-nosed stenographer who looked up from her book, yawned, and gave him a tired hello.

"Where's Sam?" Hale asked.

"The body's in there," the girl said, jerking her head to indicate an inner office, "but the brain is up at Rockingham Park."

He grinned at her and walked into a somewhat larger room furnished with a lot of untidy bookcases, a battered desk, a couple of chairs, and a corroded cuspidor.

Behind the desk, a telephone jammed to his ear, was a smallish, well-rounded man of forty-five or so with bright blue eyes and a pink-skinned face. Shaggy brown hair stuck out from under a sweat-stained hat, his clothes were baggy, and at first sight he did not look very clean; actually he was clean enough, just careless. A disinterested observer would have picked his business as almost anything except what it was—he was a private detective, and a good one when he worked at it. He was saying, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," into the telephone and making pencil marks on what turned out to be a racing *Scratch Sheet,* part of the litter which completely covered the top of the desk.

Without so much as a hello, Delemater pushed a copy of the *Racing Form* forward and said, "The fourth at Rockingham. Pick one." Into the telephone he said, "Any changes?"

Hale shoved back his hat and glanced at the fourth race, a three-year-old and upwards class with ten starters at a mile and a sixteenth. "When are they off?" he asked, dropping into a chair.

"They're up there now, damn it. Hurry, will you?"

"I have to look them over, don't I?"

"You ain't got time. Just give me a good one."

Hale leaned forward, scanning past performance records, and quickly cut the field to three horses. "What's Sir Paul?"

"Eight to five."

"Who's on him?"

"Stebbins."

"Who's on Carrie B?"

"Rickard. . . . All right!" Delemater yelled into the telephone. "Gimme one!" he demanded, motioning frantically at Hale. "Quick!"

"Wait a second—"

"Wait hell! They're off. What is it?"

"All right. Firefly, you crazy fool!" Hale said.

"Five, five, and five on Firefly," Delemater cried, and leaned back in his chair in almost total collapse. He rested there grinning for a few seconds with the telephone at his ear; then he sat up and said, "Quarter. . . . Sir Paul by two. . . . Nitwit. . . . Princess Kate."

He rearranged the *Racing Form* and *Scratch Sheet.*

"Firefly's six to one," he announced happily, and began to hum contentedly. "Da-da-dum-dee-dum-dum. . . . Half. Sir Paul by two. . . . Princess Kate. . . . Wildling. Boy, did that Nitwit quit!" He pulled over the yellow pad where he kept track of his wins and losses and very neatly wrote down his bet. "Three quarters. . . . Sir Paul by a head—and he's through for the day—Princess Kate by one. . . . Wildling."

He glanced up to eye Hale with some doubt. "Does this Firefly come?" he asked suspiciously.

"How do I know?" Hale said. "You didn't give me a

chance to find out."

"Stretching." Delemater held up his hand for silence. "Princess Kate by a neck. . . . Wildling by one. . . . Sir Paul. . . . Triumphant fourth and coming fast on the outside." Plump fingers began to drum the desk top. Delemater's look of doubt became one of acute worry, slipping quickly into downright disgust. "Okay," he said wearily into the telephone. "Call me back." He hung up very gently, leaned back, blew out a sigh that rustled the papers on his desk, and said, "Jesus, how you pick 'em!"

"Out of the money?"

"Out of the money? Hell, he didn't even get a call."

"Well, what did you expect? You can't handicap a ten-horse race in a minute—and anyway, you've been studying the form; who did you like?"

"Firefly," Delemater said.

Hale jeered good-naturedly and Delemater opened a desk drawer and pulled out a box of bicarbonate of soda and a half-filled pint bottle of Old Taylor.

"I've got a job for you," Hale said, eying the whisky, "Want it?"

"Is it tough?"

"No."

"Why don't you take it, then? I thought that's what you'd been crying for."

"This is a part of one of my jobs, and it's the part you can do quicker and better than I can. I want you to check on a taxi for me. The last number of the license is 7."

"That ought to be a cinch," Delemater said sarcastically. He walked over to the window sill and put down his bottle and box beside two streaky glasses that stood there, one partly filled with water.

"It won't be tough. It's a Checker," Hale said. "You know Mike Kolb, don't you? Well the driver picked him up with another fellow at about three o'clock in front of 86 Casalle Street. He should remember where he took them. If you find Kolb, call me."

There was a silence while Delemater stirred bicarbonate into the water and gulped it down. He poured an inch of the rye as a chaser, said, "Ah," appreciatively, and came back to the desk just as the telephone rang.

"Will you do it?" Hale demanded.

"Sure." Delemater picked up the telephone, overpowered a hiccup, and let it whistle out in a sigh. "Yeah?" he said. "The second at Arlington?" He grabbed his pencil and pulled the *Scratch Sheet* under his elbow. "Okay, give me a run down."

Hale stood up and waited impatiently until he saw that Delemater's notation of the present betting odds had been completed.

"When?" he yelled.

Delemater made furrows in his brow, said, "Wait a minute, Marty," into the telephone, and looked up. "Right away," he told Hale, his blue eyes innocent.

"After what race?"

"The sixth at Rockingham. I think they're going to drop a hot one in the slot for me on that baby. That'll be in about an hour, huh? And then I'll get after it. Okay?"

"And keep on it, before the driver forgets."

Delemater promised earnestly, asking Marty the condition of the track at Tanforan, and Hale went out.

Adelaide Rankin threw the wadded bath towel at the hamper, slipped her pink-nailed toes into pink downy mules, and started toward the living-room with the

cream-colored satin robe draped over one arm. Passing the open dressing-room door, she caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror and stopped, intrigued.

"Not bad, darling," she said softly, smiling at herself and turning to present the profile of her body to the mirror. There was, she admitted, a lot of her—one hundred and fifty pounds, to be exact—but the curves were in the right places and when she had her clothes on she did not look her weight. She did not have that gross, horsy look that most women her size had, principally because she had nice straight legs and slim ankles and firm, high breasts, perhaps a little small for the rest of her. That was what made it so easy to wear those gowns that men liked so well. Absently she pressed her hand under one breast and let it slide gently down across her stomach, searching for any flabbiness that might have developed unnoticed. Naturally rounded, that was all. No roll of fat above her hips, not even a little one. Satisfied, she made a pirouette that flared out the satin gown, and continued into the living-room.

Funny how one's ideas changed. Not until four or five years ago did she realize the true worth of what had always seemed a frightful handicap. She remembered how ashamed she used to be of her size when she was in school, those tight brassières she bound herself in, to disguise her early maturity, the stoop she had affected to minimize her height. Had she not been one of those selected to adorn the local float in the Parade of Roses, she might still be walking around like that.

But the small-town artist who designed that float had sensed what might be done with her height—Seibolt, his name was—and had fashioned a scanty costume and made her stand up straight. The float had been a boat of

flowers, and she had stood in the bow, an auburn-haired goddess of the sea, shivering and ashamed until she got used to it and realized that the smiles directed her way were frankly admiring. A faint, reminiscent softness touched her mouth and the corners of her eyes. She lifted her shoulders and slipped on the robe, belting it tightly. Dropping into the wine-colored chair in the corner, she selected a cigarette and drew smoke into her lungs.

That appearance had changed her whole life. Somewhere along the line of that parade, a talent scout had been impressed with the beauty of her figure, and afterward had arranged a screen test for her. Photographing equally well in an evening gown or a bathing suit, she had been given a stock contract at fifty a week. Her size limited her chances, but there were lots of spots—musicals, background shots in polite society dramas—where she could be used to advantage, and she remembered the precious moments when she sat in darkened theaters and saw those fleeting glimpses of herself that had escaped the cutting-room floor. When her contract in movieland ended she had come to New York with a group that had been collected by a producer of night-club shows for a Broadway appearance. Six weeks there, another month in London, and then, when the contract ended, Gene Gorham.

Her face clouded and she mashed out the cigarette. She should have married him. She could have if she had wanted to. He was no different from the others, from the first man who had ever told her what she had. She was eighteen then, but looked older, and they were at a party. He never touched her, but he couldn't keep his eyes off her. She remembered him well. Stacy, his name was. A big, dark, muscular man with a vitality that

glowed; reminded her of that Hale fellow, darn him.

"Some day," Stacy had said, "I'm going to have a big girl like you, just to see what it's like."

She had indexed that look in the back of her mind, had identified it with increasing regularity ever since. She had always considered herself clever in keeping Gorham on the employer-employee basis. He had not liked it, but he knew that to his business she was well worth the hundred a week he paid her. If she had married him, she would have something now. That $11,000 he had in the bank, for instance.

Her frown cut deeper. She hadn't the faintest idea what had become of the $8,000 they had taken in the night before, but—the frown twisted into a smile again—there was still a chance to get something out of it. With a few thousand she could go back to the Coast, get a couple of rooms at the Beverly-Wilshire, a snappy convertible—she still had good clothes and lots of them—and start a new campaign.

That mousy little fellow with the funny-looking glasses who had given Gene the check for $1900 was one she could collect from. Tilton, his name was, and badly frightened, too. She might have to wait awhile for it, but—

The drone of the buzzer sliced through her thoughts and brought a faint annoyance. She rose, swept the skirts of her gown in place, felt her hair, and opened the door to find Max Hale standing there.

Some instinctive twinge of apprehension passed over her when she saw him. He was smiling, but there was something else in his dark eyes that she could not catalogue. She had known from the first that here was one man who could match her guile and might be difficult

to handle. The thought was disconcerting, and to disguise her reaction she put on her brightest manner.

"Oh, how nice!" she said. "Come in."

Hale ran frank, approving eyes over the satin gown and the curves it enclosed. "Very nice, very nice indeed."

"Thank you," Adelaide replied with a little curtsy.

She closed the door and, when Hale had unbuttoned his balmacaan, handed him the cigarette box. She sat down on the divan, leaning in one corner with her legs up, her body at ease. The skirt of her gown had slipped away from one leg as she settled herself, disclosing a perfect calf and a round, pink knee. When Hale pulled a chair up he looked at the knee, grinned at her.

"Please," he said. "Don't take my mind off my business."

"Oh." Adelaide flipped the skirt over her leg, considered being haughty, and decided not to. She put disappointment in her voice and made a pout with her lips, but it was wasted because he was not looking at her. "And all the time I thought this was a social call."

"Not this one." Hale looked at her again and was impressed with what he saw. "But I could come back," he said, and sounded as if he meant it.

"Could you? That might be nice." She watched him speculatively. "Well—"

He pulled his chair closer, his eyes suddenly steady and no longer smiling. "Look," he said bluntly, "there were some IOU's of Mrs. Allenby's—and a couple of her notes—in Gorham's safe."

The suddenness of the attack might have been effective if Adelaide had not been an actress. As it was, only her brown eyes showed concern—and not for long.

"Were there?" she said politely.

"There were. And I want them."

She smiled, her tone acid. "Do you really? Certainly you're not suggesting that I know anything—"

"I'm not suggesting, I'm telling. You opened Gorham's safe, and you must have found the IOU's. I want them."

Adelaide was pretty good. She fluffed out her auburn hair and yawned ostentatiously before she said, "Don't be ridiculous. How could I open the safe?"

"With the combination."

"That's absurd."

"Maybe you already knew it. Maybe you knew where he had jotted it down. It doesn't matter—"

"Your theory is practically fascinating," she said with all the bitterness in the world, "but I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Suppose we have the police search the place?"

"Suppose we do. Why don't you call them?"

Hale took the next instant to study her. Although she seemed pretty assured, he felt she was bluffing. She had to be if his idea was correct. He had believed Mike Kolb when he said he had not opened the safe. If this was true, Adelaide was the next best bet, particularly when he remembered the hot electric-light bulb in this room at twenty minutes of five that morning. She had been hiding something then, and while he could not be sure, he decided to press the point and see what happened. The police part was sheer bluff, but he was a formidable bluffer when he wanted to be, and he knew it was his chief hope now. He went on, guessing at the parts he did not know.

"When I was here at a quarter of five this morning, that light"—he indicated it—"was still hot. You hadn't

been to bed. And I'll tell you why. Some time before that you had gone upstairs. You had a key. You went in and found Gorham dead on the floor, and you saw that the only way to compensate for the loss of your meal ticket was to open that safe. You left the bankbooks because you couldn't use them, but you cleaned out everything else and you sat in that chair looking over the loot and figuring out what you could collect on it."

Adelaide had pushed herself erect as he talked and her mouth tightened in hard, unpleasant lines. "I haven't the faintest idea of what you're driving at, and furthermore"—her tone was frigid and she started to get up—"I don't intend to sit here and take any abuse from you."

"Sit down!"

Adelaide had one foot on the floor, one knee on the divan. She remained poised that way, her eyes fixed on Hale's face. He stood up, his expression threatening, his voice direct, impatient, and hard.

"You don't want my abuse? Then let's call Headquarters. They'll pick out a nice cell for you down there. The charge will be grand larceny, and probably accessory to murder. You might get bail, but I doubt it."

Unlike Sue Marshall, Adelaide had never seen Hale's dark scowl and she had to accept it at face value. She averted her eyes and sat back weakly. When he wheeled and started for the telephone she had nothing left to fight back with. "No! Wait—"

Her voice was husky with alarm when she spoke, but when he turned to face her, planting balled fists on his hips, she colored and, as though ashamed of her panic, took on an elaborate calm to cover her nervousness.

"You win," she said indifferently.

"Well—" He stayed nasty.

"If you must have the truth"—she shrugged to show it really did not matter—"I did go up there."

"When?"

"About—" She hesitated, pursing her lips. "About three, I guess."

"Why? Why should you go up there at that hour?"

"I wanted a drink. I couldn't sleep, and that's what I needed. I knew Gene always stayed up late—he never got up until one—and I took a chance and called him. When he didn't answer, I thought he might be out. Sometimes he'd be out all night in one of those floating card games—so I thought I'd go up and get a bottle."

She told all this with her eyes on her lap, her fingers wrinkling the ends of the sash. She got it out very quickly so that Hale had the impression that perhaps the story was not completely true. That did not bother him much just now, however, because he wanted those IOU's and knew that he would get them. He let her continue.

"He was there on the floor when I went into his room." Her voice died to a whisper. "I don't know how long I stood there. I was petrified and numb and, oh, I don't know what I felt. I made myself get the drink, and then I began to think about it. There was nothing I could do now. I knew there were some things in the safe and"—her chin came up and the deep pools of her brown eyes were defiant—"well, why shouldn't I take what I could? I earned some of it." She hesitated and, with her eyes wide and anxious, made her voice disdainful. "And now I suppose you'll go to the police anyway—just to show how smart you are."

Hale had been thinking about just that. Although it was conceivable that this woman had shot Gorham, he did not think so. And right now he was not interested

in solving a murder. It was, with the exception of Harold Barclay's connection, none of his business, and since he did not see how Adelaide Rankin's exposure would help any in finding out about Barclay, he saw no point in dragging her into it—at least not now. Then, too, he was still smarting under Captain Noonan's contemptuous attitude. Let the police do their own detective work.

"Get the letters and IOU's," he said.

Quick relief flooded Adelaide's features and she let out a sigh that had been pent up for a long time as she stumbled to her feet and hurried from the room. When she came back two or three minutes later with a long envelope in her hand, she had color in her cheeks, composure in her manner. "You're going to pay me for them, aren't you?"

"Sure." Hale grinned. "One thousand dollars."

"But the IOU's are for thirty-eight hundred."

"I could get them for nothing, you know. But my client ought to pay something for her foolishness, and at thirty cents on the dollar she's getting a good buy." He took out a checkbook and a pen, leaned over a table. "Then, too, I suppose women like you who are helpless and alone in the world have to eat."

"Make it two thousand," Adelaide argued, "and I'll take the sarcasm."

Hale tore out the check and shook his head. "I'm compounding a felony by giving you anything."

"Why, you lousy chiseler," Adelaide said, forgetting her diction lessons.

Hale took the envelope, totaled up the IOU's, and counted four notes. "Okay?" he asked, offering the check.

Adelaide gave him a long, disdainful stare, said, "All

right, Shylock," caustically, and snatched the check.

She walked over to the door with him, and as he opened it some of the disdain in her eyes had been replaced by what might have been a grudging respect for a worthy foe. "You *are* a meany, aren't you?"

"Not always," Hale said. As he put on his hat and started down the hall, her voice came floating up to him, saying, "I wonder."

Chapter Nine: IN THE RIBS, FROM BOTH SIDES

SUE MARSHALL was still at her desk when Max Hale came into the office shortly after six. She glanced up from her book to eye him anxiously; then her face lit up as she saw his broad smile. "You got them," she said happily.

"Right you are, angel." He pulled out the envelope, kissed it lightly, and tucked it away again. "And very cheap, too." Still basking in self-satisfaction, he patted her shoulder and started for the inner office, intent upon a little private gloating over his success. "You shouldn't have waited for me," he added, stopping. "Don't you know how late—" Something about the look she gave him checked the sentence, and he hesitated.

"Aren't you going to tell me about it?" she asked quietly.

Instantly he was ashamed. She had taken her glasses off and he saw that her hazel eyes were a little hurt. Her blond young face looked tired, and her slenderness seemed fragile, weary. A sense of guilt engulfed him as he remembered her spirited loyalty that morning; she had been up since six o'clock, sitting here all day waiting for him, and now he was going to be thick-headed

about it and tell her she could go home. "Sure, I'm going to tell you," he said heartily. "You're part of the company, aren't you? I just thought you might be tired—"

"Oh, I'm not tired," she said eagerly.

"Come on in, then." He stood aside and she passed in front of him, straight and trim in her tailored suit.

Hidden behind a pine panel in one corner of the inner office was a small electric ice-box. He got out ice, glasses, Scotch, and a siphon of soda. "How about it?" he asked.

"Not now. Thanks just the same."

He said okay, drank deeply, and brought the glass over to the desk. Sliding down in the leather-upholstered chair, he pulled out a cigarette and began to talk.

Sue listened attentively at first; then, while part of her brain followed the story with interest, the other part began to speculate about Max Hale—and her work with him. When she had first come, the job had seemed like an answer to a business girl's prayer. She had been a year out of Wellesley—a year without work, of living at home and being bored. Hale's name had been familiar to her. She had seen it often, on both the society and the sports pages of the newspapers, and she had thrilled at the opportunity of working for him. There was something virile and masculine and romantic about him that had immediately captured her. She had been happy and unworried about it until, a month ago, she had talked with a stenographer from an office down the hall. They were having lunch together.

"You're the fourth one he's had in a year," the girl had said, after inquiring how she liked the job. "I've been wondering how long you'd stay."

She stated with dignity that she didn't see the connection. Mr. Hale had never made any passes at her.

The girl had laughed and said meaningly, "That's just the trouble. He always hires good-lookers, but never does anything about it. One of them quit. The other two made passes at him and he fired them."

Now, watching the play of lights and shadows across his rugged, somber face, she remembered the countless times she had started out in the morning with the firm resolve to quit. But it always was the same. He laughed and kidded her, and she got angry and forgot what she intended to do. He was always making her angry with that brusque, casual way of his; treating her like a younger sister, as though she had no feelings. And yet he could be so darned sweet—with his crooked little smile, and that occasional, fleeting look that went right through you and left you soft and wobbly.

The trend of her thoughts brought up a new problem that left her doubtful and disturbed. Why should she care how he treated her as long as she was well paid? She certainly wasn't in love with him. Was she? Honesty made her postpone her decision, but of one thing she was sure: he must never know that she remotely considered such a thing. And to be certain that this should be clear, she had to continue being just as blunt and indifferent as he. She saw that he had finished and was watching her curiously. She spoke hurriedly.

"I think it's marvelous—about the letters, I mean." She flushed and glanced away before she added, "You're going to return them in the morning?"

"Yeah. And by the way"—he pulled out the two cards and the promissory note the police had taken away from her that morning—"here are our precious cards. Put them back in the file." He tossed them on the desk.

"What about Mr. Barclay?"

"I don't know," Hale said morosely.

"What do the police think?"

"I don't think they know much, to tell the truth. There are so many people chasing around through this case, it's hard to tell where they all fit."

"You're not going to do anything more about it, are you?"

"In what way?"

"Well—" Sue pursed her lips and made a faint shrugging gesture with her hands. "You did what you agreed to do for Miss Powell. And you can't do anything much about Mr. Barclay, so I should think you'd keep out of it."

Hale considered this as he made another drink. He had already thought a little about it on his ride to the office. Barclay still remained a hazy, almost imaginary figure in his mind. His conference with the man might have happened in a dream; now that the fellow had disappeared, the obvious conclusion was that he had overreached himself. What bothered him was that he happened to have one or two definite hunches, and these hunches did not substantiate certain direct evidence that had been accepted as accurate and reliable. At the moment the key to the murder lay with Barclay, and, until he was found, there did not seem to be very much he could do.

He had been around enough to know that the police department of a large city was a surprisingly efficient organization. With its manpower, equipment, laboratory specialists, and contacts with the underworld, it was superbly endowed to tackle a job such as the disappearance of Harold Barclay. If there was no great brilliance in the average detective, it was because brilliance had

but little place in the ordinary detection of crime, which was, Hale knew, easily 95 percent routine.

In spite of his dislike for Captain Noonan, he had to admit his efficiency. The facts he had learned from the maid who had overheard Hale's conversation with Gorham; the discovery of Gleason, the butler; the disclosure of Lyda Allenby's visit the night before; the presence of Flaherty in Barclay's room—all told him that Noonan knew his job. In the case of Mike Kolb, Hale had jumped the gun because he remembered him from the night before, and with Delemater's help he might keep ahead of the police if he so desired; but Barclay's disappearance was something else. If the man was to be found, the police would probably find him.

He tasted his new drink, glanced at Sue, and went back to thoughts which promptly veered around to the origin of this office. As long as he could remember, he had had an interest in crime. His qualifications—a great deal of reading and research, a good foundation in psychology, an analytical mind—were sound enough, but his newspaper experience had started the ball rolling.

Possibly because it was different and opened up new contacts, he enjoyed the work. Two years of prowling around Police Headquarters, knowing cops, fighters, bookies, reporters, and photographers, had made him dissatisfied with anything less stimulating. Unfortunately he was not very good at it. He could not keep a job, he was neither rich nor foolish enough to buy a newspaper, and the detective idea looked like an acceptable compromise. It gave him a little standing, and his permit took the place of his reporter's police card.

Nevertheless, Sue—and his friends—had been right. Until yesterday the Hale Agency had been no more than

an idea, a means to justify a hobby. At that, he had been quite serious about it when he started, or so he thought. He fully intended to do something about it some time; but that was a distant sort of promise. Perhaps someone would come in some day with a simple little job that he could handle—he grinned out the window—and someone did come in. Now he was mixed up in a murder investigation—and he found out he liked it.

Hell, he said to himself, maybe I'm even getting good. The grin grew noticeable as he put down his glass. "Don't worry," he said aloud. "I'm not going to get in any deeper, but I've got a couple of ideas and I'd like to stick on the sidelines and see how they come out. Of course, I wouldn't want to overwork myself on the first job."

"That would never do, would it?" Sue said tartly.

He squinted at the note of sarcasm, grinned it off. "And never mind the cracks. I know I've got a lot to learn, and this is about the first chance I've had. Not that I'm kidding myself that I could solve the thing. Well"—he glanced at his strap watch—"how about some dinner? Sort of celebrate our first success?"

Sue hesitated; then her lips tightened. "No, thanks."

He was about to argue when he sensed that it would be futile. He scowled faintly, wondering at the bluntness of her refusal and comparing her tone with the one she had used when he first came in. Because he did not understand it, he dismissed it. "Some other time, then," he said. "I'm going to look up the night watchman or janitor or whatever he is. Will you lock up?"

She said she would, and he went downstairs to find his man in a little room near the boilers. A bandy-legged oldster, with leathery skin and handle-bar mustaches,

he answered to the name of Gus.

"Hello, Gus," Hale said, "how's the cave-dweller?"

"Swell, Mr. Hale," Gus said, smiling. "You get lost?"

"No. I wanted to ask you about last night. Thanks for telephoning me. What time was it when you found out the door was open?"

Gus gave him a blank-faced stare. "What door?"

"I'm talking about last night," Hale explained. "The call you gave me about the guy breaking into my office." He hesitated, peering into Gus's puzzled face; then trouble settled over him.

"I didn't make no call," Gus protested.

"At three-thirty or so last night?"

"At three-thirty I'm catching some shut-eye. After one o'clock, when I try the doors, I come down here and curl up."

Hale asked other questions—automatically, because in those first few seconds he was too amazed and incredulous to grasp the significance of his discovery. It had been natural enough, in his sleep-fogged condition, to accept the telephoned information, and he had had no time to investigate until now, no particular reason for doubting it, since the information had checked with the forcing of the door and the filing cabinet. He stood very still, a sultry far-away look in his eyes, his thoughts pounding roughshod through his brain until he found an answer that brought a strange, hollow feeling to the pit of his stomach and left him tense and worried. There was only one reason why anyone should have telephoned him—

"Somebody musta been kiddin' you, huh?" Gus said.

"Yeah," Hale said grimly. "Yeah." Thrusting a bill at the astounded Gus, he spun about and strode toward

the stairs. In long leaps that slapped his coat-tails against his heels, he went up to the foyer and out on the sidewalk.

It was dark now. The surrounding office buildings had been emptied long ago, and the street seemed strangely deserted, the air curiously chilled in spite of his buttoned coat. There was a taxi stand at the corner, and to avoid delay he moved toward it, leaving his own car in the parking lot two blocks away.

Within twelve minutes the cab swung off Charles into a quiet, steeply sloping street that presented to the night skyline a jagged silhouette of roof tops which climbed in stiff, huge steps from house to house. The driver pulled to a stop in front of a red brick building that looked a hundred years old and was. Recently modernized on the inside, it had been converted into three apartments, one to each floor. Hale had redecorated the top one to suit his tastes, preferring the location and atmosphere of the place to the more obvious swank of the newer Beacon Street apartments.

Stepping out on the old brick sidewalk, he gave the driver a dollar bill and turned into the tunnel-like entryway which was recessed in the façade, since the narrowness of the street and walk gave no other alternative. A grilled iron door guarded the glass door beyond, and light from the inner foyer glowed dimly on the three steps from sidewalk to entrance landing. He was too intent on getting out his keys to notice anything until a sound of movement beside him made him glance about. Then it was too late. The shadowy bulk of the man was close, and the gun was in his ribs.

"Easy now!" The voice was low, curt.

Hale felt the quick, hard thrust of a second gun from

the opposite side. "Go ahead. Unlock it!"

Wedged between the two guns, Hale thrust the key into the lock and turned it.

"That's the ticket." The man caught the door with his foot to keep it from swinging shut, but without relieving the pressure of the gun. "Okay, Eddie," he said.

Eddie backed toward the sidewalk, gun in hand. Hale, surveying the other gunman with smoldering eyes, found the impassive, thick-lipped face unfamiliar. The brim of his hat shielded most of his features, but he was as big as Hale and there was a jagged scar along the lower rim of his jawbone.

"What is it? A stick-up?"

"You'll find out."

"You're damn right I will."

"And don't get loud about it."

Somewhere behind him a car door slammed. Presently heels rapped along the brick walk and turned to echo in the entryway. Six heels all together.

One of the men was of average size; the other two made Hale think of those "long and short of it" press pictures that show the tallest man in the group holding his arm outstretched over the head of the shortest. The tall man, Eddie, was the flat-nosed fellow who had come for Kolb that afternoon; the little man he did not know. The third one was Lee Fonseca.

"Where'd you get the army?" Hale sneered.

"Let's go upstairs," Fonseca said.

Chapter Ten: TWICE SEARCHED

THE apartment had been remodeled to make up a living-room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and two baths.

The living-room was enormous, extending clear across the front of the building, and Hale had paneled it with knotty pine and built in some bookcases and a sizable fireplace. He had a man who worked there during the day, and when he entered with his escorts there was a fire in the fireplace and the room was comfortable, cheery.

"Now what the hell do you want?" he said nastily.

"We want to take a look around," Fonseca said.

"Okay. And after you leave I'll go down and sign a complaint and maybe you can laugh that off."

"Sign a complaint?" Fonseca looked surprised in an unworried way. "I don't think so. You asked us up here, remember? And then you bet me ten bucks we couldn't find out where you kept your stationery. So we tried it." He glanced at the others. "Isn't that it, boys?"

Hale fumed inwardly, and would have admired the man's cool insolence except that he was too troubled over the information Gus had given him. He had not the faintest idea of what Fonseca sought, and in any case he knew there was nothing he could do about it.

"Okay," Fonseca ordered. "Get started. Two of you take the other rooms. Albert"—he indicated the little man—"go over those books at the end of the room."

He turned back to watch Hale—a slender, dapper man with a thin mouth, squarish jaw, and small greenish eyes that were alert, fathomless; a gambler's eyes, trained to reveal nothing. His clothes were expensive, but a shade too extreme in cut. There was no bluster about him, just a quiet hardness, which, with the unrelenting coldness of his glance, gave a tight, unpleasant look to his colorless face.

"I think I'll take the desk," he said. "Mind?"

"Go right ahead." Hale bowed, his voice virulent. "I insist." He sat on the edge of the club chair and felt for a cigarette. He could have made it to the door, had he wanted to, but after such preliminaries he decided to find out the reason for the call. The fact that Fonseca ordered the bookcases to be searched gave him some clue as to the nature of the object sought, but beyond that he had no ideas.

"Hmm," Fonseca grunted, lifting a .32 automatic from the top drawer of the desk. "Got a permit for this thing?" He cocked an eye at Hale, replaced the gun, and continued his search, pawing through papers, letters, bills—his inspection swift, but thorough.

Hale watched him go through the second drawer, then gave his attention to the little man who was at the opposite side of the room taking out the books and flipping the pages. He was content to have Fonseca make this search—for two reasons. He wanted to know why. And he knew that he himself would have to make a similar search just as soon as possible. Why else should anyone decoy him from his apartment except to—

"Say—" Fonseca drew out the word on an ascending scale. "You must be preparing for war."

Hale turned as the man straightened up from the opened bottom drawer. When he saw the gun, his eyes bulged and things tightened up inside him. He shrank from the dark whisper of his fears, and the quick coldness that slid over him slipped away to leave his face hot and his palms damp. The gun Fonseca turned over in his hands was short-barreled, about the size of a .38. Hale had never seen it before, but he knew what it was.

Fonseca was watching him curiously, and Hale twisted his face in a sardonic grin. "Maybe I should carry

one after this," he said.

Fonseca said maybe he should, replaced the gun, and went on with his search.

It was hard to sit still now. Like a sliver beginning to fester, one thought kept boring in: the killer had planted the gun and whenever he was ready would tip off the police. Hale knew this was the sort of evidence murderers were convicted with, and the truth would be so fantastic as to make such evidence more conclusive to a jury. No explanation would be believed unless the actual killer confessed.

"Make it fast, will you?" he snapped. "I'm getting a little fed up with this."

"Sure." Fonseca closed the desk drawer, glanced about. "Find anything, Albert?"

"Naw." The little man moved away from the bookcases. When the other two came out of the bedrooms, Fonseca said to Hale, "Look, let's quit horsing around. Hand it over and we'll call it off."

"Hand what over?"

"You found the body, didn't you? The police haven't got it. They're trying to hook me up with Mike Kolb and I've been down there getting my ears talked off all afternoon. If they had it they would've let me know. But they haven't—and that leaves you."

"I don't like riddles," Hale said. His look was perplexed, but his voice was grim. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about. If you want to tell me, okay. If not, suppose you clear out."

Fonseca considered this, his eyes narrow and suspicious in his otherwise inscrutable face. He scratched the side of his mouth, tipped his head at an angle. "Just to set you straight and stop this run-around, I'm going to

tell you. But don't get the idea you can go to the law with it, because I've got three boys here that say I've never been in this joint." He glanced around at them and they stood there motionless, their eyes hostile.

"You got quite a bit of dope from Kolb," Fonseca went on. "The rest of it is this: Gene Gorham owed me ten grand—from a stud game two weeks ago. I couldn't seem to get it, I was afraid he'd blow town, and I figured to knock off an evening's take and call it square. Mike did the job for me, but to sidestep any beef, I gave Gorham's IOU to Mike and told him to leave it. Mike came back in to tap him about one-thirty or so. He was lucky to hit him from behind, so he wasn't seen. And after he picked up the cash, he put the marker on the desk."

Hale listened, digesting the story, believing it. Leaving behind an IOU might seem improbable to the average man because it would be deliberately incriminating. But he had found gamblers a curious lot and understood Fonseca's reasoning. He wanted to let Gorham know exactly why he had been hijacked, and he was secure in his knowledge that Gorham could not go to the police. To do so meant that the story of his welshing would come to light, and a gambler who welshed could never hope to run the sort of game Gorham practiced. The story would follow him wherever he went. He might rave, and smash things: he might swear vengeance on Fonseca, but it would be a private quarrel; probably he would take his loss and make the best of it.

"And at that," Fonseca went on, "I lose two grand on the deal. There was only eight in the kitty." He flipped his hands palms-up "So now you know. That IOU was left there—with my name on it. Somebody came in and rubbed him out later. The guy must have spotted the

marker and saw a chance to frame me for the job." His voice thinned out. "I'd like to meet up with that lad some day, but—anyway, the cops tell me there was a little piece of paper in Gorham's hand. I'm pretty sure the rest of that IOU will match that piece. I want it."

"You mean you've got to have it," Hale said.

"Yeah."

"But it's still no dice. I haven't seen it."

Fonseca's lids came down over the small green eyes, and the thin line of his mouth was nasty. "If you want it that way, okay." He stepped back, jerked his head in command. "Search him!"

"Wait a minute!" Hale's face got dark and his voice was angry. "I told you I haven't got it."

"And you wouldn't give it to us if you did, huh?"

"Never mind that. I didn't mind humoring you and letting you clutter up the place, but this other is out."

The three men moved slowly toward him from three angles and Hale stepped over to get the wall at his back. He had but one thought—the envelope in his pocket that belonged to Marion Powell. He watched the trio. Scar-face and Eddie, the big fellow with the flat nose, came in, arms at their sides; the little fellow was off at an angle. There was a ratty sharpness to his pasty face and he was taking a blackjack from his hip pocket.

Outraged by the coincidence which had made him a victim, Hale's anger rose ugly and boiling to dull his reasoning. He only knew he would probably lose the envelope and the idea infuriated him so that he voiced the first alternative that popped into his mind.

"Look," he said, "you're a gambler, Fonseca. What do you say to this? You don't count. The punk here"—he gestured toward Albert—"won't weigh one twenty-five

with a bottle under each arm, but—"

"Don't let it fool you," Albert lipped nastily.

"—these two"—Hale nodded at the others—"have got the bulge on me. I'll take them one at a time—Flat-nose first, because I owe him something."

Fonseca shook his head.

"For a thousand-dollar bet. If I win, you shove off—"

Fonseca shook his head again. "Let's go," he said.

The moment he finished, Hale realized how silly his proposal sounded. It had merely been a wild, grasping chance to fight it out with a hope of winning. But Fonseca had too much at stake to fool around.

Flat-nose swung first and Hale hit him flush on the jaw, dropping him to the knee. Before he could turn, Scarface caught him with a looping right on the side of the head, but Hale bounced back from the wall and staggered him with a left hook. At the same time he felt the numbing shock of Albert's blackjack on his shoulder and turned to slap him open-handed into Fonseca's arms.

He was just beginning to enjoy himself when the tardy thrust of his original idea pulled him up with a shock. For the next minute or two he battled automatically. He kept knocking men down, and they kept getting up and slugging him. He remembered being dropped to his knees twice, but the other details were hazy. Anger at the threatened loss of the envelope had blunted his reasoning so that he had completely overlooked the main issue, and with startling suddenness he realized his mistake.

He thought he could stand off the triumvirate for a while longer, but when they got discouraged or Fonseca got annoyed, they would start clubbing guns. That fact

made the important issue not the envelope—which he would lose eventually, unless Fonseca overlooked it—but time. Time. And he was wasting it. The thought of surrender sickened him, but he had rushed up here to search the apartment, and now that he knew the gun was here, he had to get rid of it. He saw that Flat-nose was on him again, and slid along the wall, fending him off.

"Wait a minute," he yelled. The fellow stopped. "If I let you search will you shove off?"

"What's the matter?" Fonseca asked quietly. "The way you were swinging you looked good for another ten minutes."

"He can't take it, that's all," flat-nose Eddie leered.

"He could take *you,*" Fonseca grunted. "Okay, search him."

Hale put his arms up and stood still. Eddie and Scarface did the searching and Albert, the side of his head livid and bruised, muttered under his breath as he slapped the blackjack in frustration.

Hale held his breath while Fonseca inspected the things which were taken from his pockets, but when he saw the fellow look into the envelope his hope sank.

"Uh-huh." Fonseca lowered one lid. "IOU—but not mine. . . . Hmm—and letters."

"Put them back," Hale said.

"I think I'll keep them."

"I'll be down after them—some time when you haven't got your army."

"I'll put them away where they'll be nice and safe." He tucked the envelope inside his coat. "Just in case. Maybe you haven't got what I want, but know where it is, or maybe you'll run across it. If you do, I'll trade." He

moved over to the door, followed by his retinue. "If you squeal on me I'll make it as tough as I can."

For only a second after the quartet left did Hale stand there hating himself for giving up; then he went quickly to the door to make sure it was locked. He believed he could get Marion Powell's envelope back. From what Fonseca had said, he knew that Adelaide Rankin had the IOU. He felt sure he could get it, and with it in his possession, he could handle Fonseca.

There was a stack of mail on the table in the entryway, and he pawed over two wrapped magazines, wondering if there was sufficient paper there for his needs, realizing at once that he could not use it since his address was stenciled there. In the kitchen he found some brown paper in the wastebasket. Bringing it back to the living-room, he stepped to the desk and opened the bottom drawer. As he picked up the gun with a handkerchief, he saw the envelope. It was face-down and part of a crimson wax seal still clung to paper beneath the flap.

With the gun on the desk top, he turned over the envelope to read the name he knew was there: *Harold Barclay*. Resentment corroded his thoughts, and muscles bulged at the hinges of his jaws. Right then he knew he had to find Barclay, and he had to find him before the police did.

There was a newspaper in the desk wastebasket. After glancing over it to be sure there was nothing to identify it, he wrapped it around the gun, being careful not to touch it with his fingers. He made a neat package with the brown paper and tied it with string he had brought from the kitchen. Reaching out for the desk-set fountain pen, he checked himself and selected a pencil instead; then, with his left hand, he printed: POLICE HEAD-

QUARTERS, CITY. He was half-way across the room, the package in his hand, when a knock pounded at the door.

Loud, ominous, the sudden threat froze him rigidly in his tracks, and like a physical shock left him stunned and helpless until he could make himself think. His first impulse, to ignore the summons, he discarded. This room faced the street. Anyone interested would know from the lights that he was at home.

The knock came again, hard and insistent, jarring his tensed nerves, but warning him he must answer. "Yeah?"

"It's Cody. Open up!"

Hale fought panic and looked wildly about. Something told him this was no friendly call. If there was a search to be made, Cody would be much more thorough than Fonseca's men, because he was practiced and such work was part of his trade.

"Okay," he called. "Just a minute."

He put five minutes of desperate thinking into those next seconds. In the end it was inspiration more than analysis that suggested an answer. Without further hesitation, he stepped back for the envelope. Walking hurriedly into the entryway, he sandwiched it between some other letters, and put the compact brown package between the two wrapped magazines.

When he unlocked and opened the door to face Cody and Sergeant Flaherty, he concentrated on making his voice good-humored and mocking. "You're working late, aren't you?" he said, glancing at his strap watch.

Cody looked at his own watch. "Ten minutes of eight? Is that late?" He peered at Hale's face. "Who've you been arguing with now?"

Hale's hand went quickly to his face, felt the lump on

his cheekbone. "With a blonde," he said indulgently. "I bruise easily."

"Yeah—well, how about letting us in?"

"Sure." Hale kept his voice mocking. "Got a warrant?"

"I don't think you can read it," Cody said, taking a folded paper from his inside pocket, "but you can try."

Hale knew how serious it was now, but he pretended the idea was ridiculous, waving the warrant aside and saying: "You didn't need it, you know."

"We wanted to be sure," Cody said. "We want to do a lot of looking."

"As bad as that?"

"It's only routine," Flaherty said sheepishly. He pushed into the room and shut the door. "But you know how it is." Hale said he did and Flaherty added to Cody, "See? I told you he wouldn't squawk."

"I suppose it's okay if I read my mail." Hale picked up the pile and spoke casually. "Since you're going to be so long."

"Sure," Cody said.

Hale moved over to the club chair. "Maybe you'd better search this before I sit down; then I won't have to move again."

Cody gave him a curious steady look that was not reassuring and patted the cushions. "And maybe I'd better search you while I'm about it," he said.

Not wanting to be too agreeable, Hale made his tone a little surly. "Sure. Shall I strip?"

"I guess not." Cody reached out and Hale lifted his arms, gripping the letters, magazines and packages in one hand. Cody slapped his pockets, ran his fingers over his body, blushing a little when he saw Hale's disdain-

ful stare. "Okay," he said, and turned to start his search with the desk.

Hale opened two letters, scanned them without knowing what he read. Cody discovered his gun, commented on it, and presently finished his inspection of the desk. Flaherty was already busy in the other rooms, and when Cody moved over toward the bookcase, Hale ripped the paper from one of the magazines. Cody turned, watched him wad the paper and toss it into a wastebasket. The moment he continued his search, Hale took the string from the package, loosened the paper, and let the gun slide into his lap. He had to hold it there for two or three minutes while Cody searched his end of the room, and although he buried himself in the pages of a magazine, he could feel the sweat come out on his forehead. He had to wait until Cody stooped to examine the cushions of the divan before he could get a handkerchief around the gun and slip it into his hip pocket. With that out of the way he sighed with relief and crumpled the brown paper, tossing it into the basket.

The two detectives were there nearly fifteen minutes before Cody called a halt. "Okay, Ben," he told Flaherty. "I guess it was another one of those things."

Hale put the stack of letters on the table. "Is it okay to tell me what you were looking for, now that I haven't got it?"

"We weren't sure," Cody said. His eyes were less suspicious now, but when he happened to notice the wastebasket, he poked in its depths, rustling the crumpled brown wrapping with the telltale Police Headquarters address before he straightened up. "But if that gun of yours was a .38 instead of a .32 I'd have taken it along."

He took off his hat, then put it on again, tugging a

little at the brim, as though embarrassed and trying to find something to say that would not give him away. He solved his problem with an abrupt: "Thanks for not making it tougher."

"Okay," Hale said. "Drink?"

Cody shook his head, and Flaherty, whose tongue was practically hanging out, was too sheepish by now to accept. Even so, Hale was still conscious of Cody's constant scrutiny and he wondered if the moisture on his forehead was noticeable. When they finally started across the room it was all he could do to keep from rushing them out so he could lock the door.

Turning in the hall, Cody said, "Well, thanks," awkwardly before he left. Flaherty muttered something in his throat. Hale shut the door, locked it, leaned back against it, and blew out his breath. When he went to make a drink, he laughed jerkily and saw that his hands were still trembling.

Chapter Eleven: PROFESSION, LAWYER

MAX HALE spent the early part of the next morning at his business offices on Federal Street, going over certain matters with the efficient, middle-aged spinster who helped him manage the estate and who had got him out of bed to insist that he put in an appearance and go over the current month's balance with her. As a result he reached the office in the Siddon Building to find Marion Powell waiting with Bill Carter in tow.

Carter, looking more husky and blond than ever in his polo coat, had regained his normal affability and made no objection when Marion announced she wanted to see Hale, and that he could wait provided he didn't

annoy Sue Marshall.

"Is he still sore?" Hale asked after he had closed the inner door.

"Not very," Marion said.

"Why don't you tell him the truth?"

"Why should I? I'm not going to start begging forgiveness yet." She flashed him a quick, fleeting smile. "A girl has to have some independence."

"You've got enough," Hale said. "Sit down."

Marion ignored the invitation, began to pace the room, a tall, healthy-looking figure in a three-piece suit of greenish wool, topped by a fur collar and matching hat with a saucy feather in its crown. He let her pace, watching her idly, knowing that she would eventually get down to telling what she had in mind. He was surprised that she had not asked about the IOU's, and thinking about it, he noticed that her dark blue eyes were troubled.

All at once she stopped pacing, wheeled, and came over to sit on the edge of the desk. "I'm worried, Max," she said directly.

"About the letters?"

"Well, yes—but that's not why I'm here. I'm more worried about Stephen."

He gave her a curious glance, but she was looking down at her gloved fingers. "Yeah?" he said finally. "Why?"

"I don't know, exactly. It—it's hard to put it in words." She picked at the fingertip of her glove with the thumb of the same hand, frowning, swinging one leg absently. "I'm not trying to go intuitive on you, Max, but something is wrong. Definitely. He's much too quiet and brooding. I don't think it's what I told the po-

lice yesterday—I can't tell you why. But I found out something last night that frightened me. The police have asked him to come back to answer some more questions; they asked me, too. I don't know why, and I don't particularly care. Bill called up and I told him he could come along if he liked, and to meet me here."

"But what about last night?" Hale asked.

She looked down at the desk and traced a design with her forefinger on its polished surface before she glanced up again. "Do you remember the strange butler at Gorham's place the night before last? Is it true that the police are looking for him? One of the papers said so."

"Yes."

"Well, I saw that man come out of Stephen's office last night."

Hale sat up slowly, eyes intent. "Are you sure?"

"Quite. I'd stopped in to get a ride home, and when I stepped out of the elevator he was just turning away from the hall door that leads to Stephen's private office. He was positively furious."

"Did you see Stephen?"

"No. Somehow I didn't want to face him. Maybe I was afraid." She gave him an anxious look. "What does it mean, Max?"

Hale's glance touched some remote object and stayed there narrowed and thoughtful while he tried to fit this information into the fragments of the puzzle. When he realized that so many of the pieces were missing, that the result was only greater confusion, he looked back at her and made his voice confident. "I don't know, but it probably isn't anything. It could be about you, or Lyda. And if I know Stephen he threw the fellow out before he had a chance to peddle his information—if that's

what it was."

He did not believe a word of this, but to prevent Marion from realizing it, he changed the subject. "Want me to go down to Headquarters with you?"

"Would you?"

"Certainly. And don't worry about the letters. I'm pretty sure I can get them; if Noonan should ask you about them, tell him nothing. That was a rather magnificent bit of lying you did yesterday, and we don't want to spoil it—if you're sure that's how you'd like it."

"But of course."

"Even if it's tough on Bill, huh?" She smiled faintly at him and he said, "You love him, don't you?"

"I guess so. I'm going to marry him, anyway. And I don't think I want to wait. Mother'll be furious, but"—she sighed a little wearily—"she hasn't exactly put herself out for me these past years."

"You're not so very enthusiastic about it."

"If I'm not it's because I haven't such an awful lot to give him." Her eyes were distant, moody. "Maybe it's just because I'm an infidel. My manners aren't so good any more. The fancy ideals, if I have any left, aren't quite so important. I don't believe that life, and its living, is like what the storybooks tell us—that mother always knows best or that women are kind and good. I've found out that it's pretty silly to try to get away from realities and I don't expect to find a panacea in love. But Bill is strong and he knows what he's getting, and I'll have something to cling to."

Hale thought of other things and a quick sympathy softened his glance; he felt a curious thickness in his throat because this girl was trying desperately to grasp something important to her, and a certain sadness was

in the thought that with all her money and background she should be so lonely. There had always been plenty of boys at her heels, a constant round of social activity to keep her amused; yet the understanding she sought had somehow escaped her.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice suddenly brusque and her manner once again assuming the indifferent proportions she had come to accept. "I hate women who let self-pity make them maudlin. Shall we go?"

He wanted to make her sit beside him and get her to talk some more, because he thought that with a natural outlet her bitterness would run its course. But this was not the time to suggest it. He rose to match his mood to hers. "All right. But such rancor doesn't become you, infant. Snap out of it or I'll have to take steps."

"What steps?" Marion Powell said hopefully. "Or is that just part of the service?"

Three reporters were lounging in the rotunda at Police Headquarters when Hale came up the steps with Marion and Bill Carter. Spreading out to form a barrier, they turned to the girl. "Are you here by request, Miss Powell?"

"You might call it that," Marion replied.

"Is it in connection with—"

Carter grinned, holding up a finger like a schoolteacher warning a pupil to be careful. "That isn't nice."

"Speak when you're spoken to, William," they said, grinning back at him.

"But Miss Powell never speaks to strange men," Carter said. "Her mother told her not to."

"Well, well." With a deference that was mocking because he resented the interference just a little, one of the

reporters said, "Perhaps you could tell us if the day has been set for the wedding."

Carter's blue eyes opened innocently. "Is there going to be a wedding?"

"Oh, come along, Bill." Marion Powell took his arm and smiled at the reporters. "We'll let you know," she said as they turned away.

The gentlemen of the press promptly ignored the pair to pounce gleefully upon Hale. "Ah, Doctor Watson, I believe," they said. "Or is it Philo Vance? And is there any truth," they said, "in the rumor that this Barclay lad the cops are looking for is a client of yours?"

Hale knew all three of them, and was smart enough to kid them along. They knew about his detective agency, had kidded him about it before because it was quite natural that they should, since young and wealthy men about town do not often announce the intention of becoming detectives. But this kidding had all been on the surface. Some of them had worked with him, liked him, knew he was not the stuffed-shirt type. That they were amused by his avocation did not lessen their respect for his ability and personality.

The minute he wasted was well spent. He knew they would find out about Barclay eventually, and he admitted that the man had come as a client. In the end he got their promise to soft-pedal the fact until something definite developed. Yet as he turned away to join Marion and Carter, one thought stood out stark and uncompromised. If Barclay was the killer, Hale was through—unless he was the one who caught him.

Stephen Allenby was already seated in Captain Noonan's office when Hale entered. When the official saw him and Bill Carter he pulled his brows down and got

ready to shower out his wrath. "This isn't gonna be any debate," he announced. "You two will have to wait outside."

"I beg your pardon," Carter said pleasantly, "but Miss Powell happens to be my fiancée. If you have anything to say to her, I have a right to hear it unless she prefers otherwise."

"You haven't got any rights in here," Noonan grunted. "Not one. Only I'm too busy now to argue about it. Sit down, if you want. But you, Hale"—he stuck out a stubby forefinger—"outside."

Hale shook his head and leaned back against the wall. He grinned. "If Miss Powell stays, I stay."

"In your hat!" sputtered Noonan. "You may have a private dick's license, but I'm running this show and I say: outside."

"I heard you."

Noonan advanced, signaling Cody, who stood near by, to join him. "Getting out?" he asked dangerously.

"Not unless Miss Powell does, and you're not going to throw me out." He hesitated, his dark eyes hard and bright. "I'm not here as a private detective. I'm here as a lawyer. Miss Powell's lawyer."

"You're what?" yelled Noonan.

"I can practice law in this state. Look it up if you like. Right now I'm representing Miss Powell and I intend to protect her interests."

Noonan gulped air, got apoplectic. Marion, as surprised as Noonan, glanced up and winked her approval, and Noonan spun on his heel, leaving a lot of things he had in mind unsaid. After he had fiddled with some papers on his desk, he turned to face Allenby.

"I haven't much to say to Miss Powell," he began

when he had a grip on himself, "and if you'd rather answer my questons in private I'll take care of her first."

"I'd rather you got it over with," Allenby said stiffly. "I have no reason to hide anything from Marion."

"Very well. Then I'll come right to the point. Why didn't you tell us yesterday that you had been up to see Gene Gorham the night he was murdered?"

Hale blinked at that one; so did Carter, while off to one side Marion Powell uttered a gasping sound. Allenby alone seemed unmoved. He sat quite erect, his elbows on the chair arm, his lean, aristocratic face impassive except for an unpleasant tightness at the mouth. He did not answer immediately, and Hale forgot his irritation at Noonan to admire the results he was getting.

"Why should I?" Allenby replied finally.

"Then you admit it?"

"Certainly," said Allenby without batting an eye. "But since I know nothing of the murder I saw no reason for becoming involved in"—he gestured diffidently—"this sort of thing. I am curious, however, to know how you found it out."

"We found you out," Noonan said flatly, "because we accept no statement in a murder case until we check it—if we can. Routine work, generally. And routine work told us you didn't arrive in town when you said. The taxi that took you home yesterday morning picked you up at the Hotel Braden. You registered shortly before one the night before. After that we showed a picture of you to the desk clerk at Gorham's apartment house and he identified you. Now suppose you tell us about it."

"There's very little to tell. I went to see Gorham about five after two, I believe."

"You saw him?"

"I did, but he was in no condition to listen to what I had to say. He seemed more than a little drunk, and quarrelsome. I told him I'd see him in the morning."

"What did you want to see him about?"

"That, I'm afraid," Allenby said calmly, "is a question I shall have to refuse to answer."

"Why? Unless you have something to hide?"

"Almost everyone has something to hide."

Noonan did not like it, but he knew better than to get tough with a man of Allenby's position. "Okay," he said shortly. "But you went to a lot of trouble to prevent anyone from knowing you were in town or that you intended to call on Gorham. We found out this much without any help from you; we'll find out the rest of it before we finish." He leaned back. "I think that's all."

He looked over at Marion Powell. "In the light of what Mr. Allenby has told us, it won't be necessary to ask but one or two questions. Do you have the IOU's and letters that Hale was to buy from Gorham?"

"Why, no," Marion Powell said. "I understood the safe was robbed."

"That's what I meant," Noonan said. "They haven't been returned to you?" She shook her head. "No one has approached you about them?"

"No."

Noonan stared at her a moment, flashed a suspicious glance at Hale; then he said all right and stood up, signifying that the interview was over.

Chapter Twelve: GROTESQUELY TWISTED

LIEUTENANT CODY leaned back in his desk chair and clasped his hands behind his neck. The neatness of his

oxford-gray suit made him look young and well groomed, and his eyes seemed almost sleepy—a deceptive mannerism brought about by lowered lids and a far-away stare. After a little while he focused the eyes.

"What's the idea of riding Noonan?" he said finally.

"I'm not riding him," Hale replied. "He doesn't like me, never has. I knew I was in for some ribbing when I opened my office. I took plenty of it—you know it; but I don't go for the nasty kind."

"It's only his way. He's getting on, and his sense of humor is all worn out."

"He jumped me up at Gorham's. He didn't want any help from me, and that's okay. But I don't like to be shoved around; and this time I don't have to take it."

"We could use some help," Cody said thoughtfully. "You could play ball with me."

"And you'll play ball with me, huh?"

"As far as I can."

Hale offered a cigarette. "I can do that much. I have a few ideas, but some I can't tell you about because I'm not in a position to play ball objectively. A client of mine is involved—I'm a little involved myself."

"I know damn well you are," Cody said dryly.

"At first I just had a job to do. Yesterday I was about ready to pull out and leave the police work to you cops. But now I've got a stake myself, because somebody is putting the pressure on me and I'm getting a little sore. Maybe I'll never do much with my agency anyway, but I'm not going to sit back and take the rap without giving it a try. If I have to close up shop I want to do the closing. Nobody's going to force me into it if I can help it."

It was a lot of talk for Hale. He realized it and was a little embarrassed. Cody considered the statement si-

lently while he accepted a light; then he leaned back again.

"We got the murder gun," he said finally.

Max Hale felt the level scrutiny of those sleepy eyes and showed what he thought was the proper amount of interest. "That's a break. Where'd you find it?"

"Somebody mailed it in."

Hale said, "Hmm," and let his eyes widen.

"Funny thing for a killer to do, isn't it?"

"The gun checks with the bullet that killed him?"

"Yep. We're trying to run down the number—but we probably won't be able to trace it. The killer'd never let go of it if he thought we could."

"Any prints?"

"A couple."

Cody leaned forward, eyes speculative. Hale had an idea he was about to ask the sort of question that would call for a direct lie, when the telephone rang. Cody looked annoyed, but he had to answer it. "For you," he said.

"Sam Delemater is here," Sue Marshall's voice said. "He wants to speak to you. Just a minute."

Delemater's voice came over the wire mild and even. "I think I found him. Down near Huntington." He mentioned a street and number. "Anything else?"

"Yes," Hale said. "Meet me out front of the place—in about ten minutes."

Cody had been listening with thinly veiled interest, but Hale sat back and made his tone conversational again. "The gun should help you," he said. "Have you got anything on Mike Kolb yet?"

"Not much." Cody looked chagrined. "We don't figure him for the killing anyway. We found out he took a

taxi on the corner near Gorham's place at about ten or fifteen minutes of two. The driver took him over to the Avenue, where he made a phone call, and then took him to Cassalle Street. That was around two-thirty. Only Kolb don't live there any more."

"Still looking for him?"

"Sure. He might know plenty."

"Come on," Hale said, rising, "and don't say I don't co-operate once in a while."

Cody looked hard at him, started to speak, checked himself, and stood up, reaching for his hat. He knew that this was more than a casual invitation, that the details would come when Hale was ready.

Sam Delemater was standing on the curbing, his back to the street, his nose buried in a wide-spread copy of the *Racing Form,* when Hale's roadster pulled up alongside and made him yank his buttocks out of the street area.

"Where the hell does he fit?" Cody asked.

"He's working for me," Hale replied. "Why?"

"He don't like us private dicks," Delemater said resignedly.

"He doesn't have to come," Hale said, indicating the Lieutenant.

Cody looked from one to the other. Things were going on that he did not know about, and the policeman in him resented it. However, he grinned and said, "Okay. It's all right to ask, isn't it?"

"But not in that tone," Delemater said, not cracking a smile.

They climbed stone steps against a yellow brick wall, went through the vestibule to a high-ceilinged hall. Somebody was practicing the piano in the apartment on

the right, and across the way a radio was blasting.

"He's on the second," Delemater said.

"Kolb?" asked Cody.

Delemater led the way down the thinly carpeted hall to the last door on the left, jerked his thumb at it, and opened his *Racing Form* again, his duty done.

"Well," Hale said, "this is the best we can do. You're the law, aren't you?"

Cody scowled at him and knocked loudly. After a pause he knocked again; and again. "What the hell is this?" he muttered, but in the end he had to send Delemater for the landlady and make her unlock the door.

They went into the living-room in a wedge-shaped formation with the landlady sputtering at their heels. They stopped almost at once, and as they spread out to advance more slowly, the landlady screamed.

Cody said, "Oh, my God!" irritably, turned, took the gasping, wide-eyed woman by the arm, and led her firmly from the room. "Now cut out the noise," he ordered. "Go on downstairs and wait till I come for you."

The shades were partly drawn and the sordid room lay quiet in the dusky dimness. The cheap furniture had been overturned. The pattern of the shabby rug had been worn down in bare patches and near one of these, in front of the doorway to an inner hall, lay a grotesquely twisted figure that had once been Mike Kolb.

He was fully dressed. Except for the dark stain on his waistcoat, there was little blood. The stiff angularity of his awkward position suggested he had been dead for some time, and near one outstretched hand was an automatic pistol with unfamiliar lines. Hale forced himself to take in the details. Two years with newspapers had

frequently acquainted him with death, but he had never accustomed himself to it. He felt uneasy and shaken, and a little tired. He turned away as the door slammed and Cody came up beside him.

"Right in the vest," Delemater said. "Two of 'em."

Cody walked around the body, muttering under his breath. When he had made a complete circuit, he took a pencil from his pocket and bent over to slip it through the trigger guard of the little automatic.

"An English gun, huh?" he grunted; then stared sullenly at Hale. "Fine God-damned clients you have."

"Maybe you think I've been hiding him?" Hale said. He glared at Cody, turned abruptly, and walked away. He was discouraged, and resentment weighed heavily upon him. He did not want to say anything more until he had a chance to think.

Delemater walked over to the windows, glanced out, and came up to him. "I might as well push off, huh?" he said hopefully. "I want to grab some lunch and get a bet down in the first at Rockingham. I got a sure winner."

"I suppose you got it right from the horse," Hale said irritably.

"No. I'm psychic."

In spite of himself a glimmer of humor fought its way through the disturbed darkness of Hale's eyes. Suddenly he remembered why he had asked Delemater to meet him. He took him by the arm to lead him to the door.

"Where you going?" Cody barked.

"Right here in the hall," Hale replied. When he had closed the door he said, "I've got another job for you."

Quickly he told Delemater about Adelaide Rankin. He had been convinced by his run-in with Fonseca and

his men that Adelaide had taken the gambler's IOU. After he had mailed the gun to Police Headquarters and finished his dinner the night before, he had gone to Adelaide's apartment to get it, only to learn that she had checked out two or three hours previously, and without leaving any forwarding address.

"How am I going to know her?" Delemater asked doubtfully after he learned the facts.

"You'll know her, all right. She's big and built—but right. About twenty-three or -four, I guess. Auburn hair, good-looking in a sexy sort of way. You'll know her, all right; so will anybody else that has seen her. That's why it should be easy. Any hack-driver that she's ridden with will remember."

"I don't know." Delemater was still doubtful. "But I'll give it a whirl."

"And look. Will you step on it? This time I'd like to find her while she's still alive."

Delemater looked at him with one eye, then both eyes. "Are you kiddin'?"

The door opened suddenly and Cody stepped out to stare suspiciously from one to the other. He was obviously in a bad mood, but all he said was, "I've got to find a phone. Wait here!"

"But listen—" Delemater began.

"You heard me!" Cody started toward the stairs.

While Max Hale told the story of his experience with Mike Kolb the preceding afternoon, Captain Noonan walked stiff-legged around the room in ever-tightening circles. By the time the account was finished, he was ready to blaze. "This is a hell of a time to tell us," he fumed.

"I was going to bring him down to Cody then," Hale argued. "Could I help it if somebody stuck a gun in my back?"

"That ain't the point," Noonan rapped. "You knew Kolb was the phony butler yesterday morning."

"Yesterday morning—and at Gorham's place—you made it clear you didn't want any help from me."

Noonan muffled an angry retort, as though recalling that his attitude had been just as Hale said. "But this is different," he grumbled lamely. He looked as though he wanted to say a lot more, but he finally turned away and began to pace the room again, stopping from time to time to glare at the fingerprint expert, who was busy with his powders and camel's-hair brushes.

Delemater had been dismissed by Cody before Noonan arrived, and now Hale sat on the window sill, sucking at a cigarette and putting things together in his mind. At first when he had seen Kolb's lifeless body on the floor, a feeling of weariness and discouragement had made analysis difficult; now he saw that this second murder clarified one point that to him was of utmost importance. Things began to cancel out in his mind. There was no definite proof that the English gun was Harold Barclay's, but this gun had not killed Gorham. The Examiner's physician had already made his preliminary inspection of the body and ordered it removed. He had also stated that Kolb had been dead at least eleven or twelve hours, putting the time of death around one or two o'clock the night before, a fact of little value at the moment.

He watched two plainclothes men come out of the little hall adjoining the other rooms, where they had been poking about in search of additional clues.

"Anything else?" Noonan asked. They shook their heads, and he pointed to the valise which had been brought from the bedroom earlier. "You're sure this is the same bag Kolb had yesterday?"

Hale said it was.

"And there was a lot of money in it, but you don't know how much?" Hale nodded and Noonan added, "Well, he had nearly eight hundred bucks on him. There was more than that in the bag, wasn't there?"

"A lot more, I'd say."

Noonan kicked the valise, gave a hard, vicious rub to his bristly mustache. He did not like to admit it, and he tried not to show it, but he was whipped. "Christ, what a mess!" he sputtered. "The farther I go, the less I know about the lousy case. I don't know what the hell to think. Where's this Barclay?" He glared impotently at Hale. "I'm beginning to think he's a myth. Nobody's seen him but you and—"

"And my secretary."

"Same thing." He wheeled, paced, wheeled again.

"Haven't you checked with Scotland Yard?" Hale asked. "He's an Englishman, you know."

Noonan opened his mouth, closed it, and for one of the few times in his life looked sheepish. He stole a glance at Hale, who was looking idly at his fingernails. Deciding that he was not being baited, he confessed. "Yeah. I forgot about that. Got a report a couple of hours ago. It's Captain Barclay. Army. Some funny regiment. Stationed in India. He's supposed to be on leave."

Hale was interested. "Sounds like a break for me," he said. "Apparently a man of character."

"Up until the time he met you," Cody said, breaking a

silence taken up with some thinking of his own.

Noonan ignored this, to continue his pacing and his thinking aloud, his voice once more disgruntled. "And Fonseca?" he demanded of no one in particular. "What about him? Kolb was hooked up with him, and now he's dead. Why?"

"Kolb went to Gorham's to hijack the night's receipts," Cody announced quietly. "I'll gamble on that. He never did figure as the killer, and now we're damn well sure. It figures two ways. Either Kolb knew too much about Fonseca and had to be put out of the way—"

"What about this gun?" Noonan reminded him.

"You can pick up foreign guns in pawnshops—it could be a plant. Or else Kolb knew who killed Gorham and made the mistake of trying to collect from the killer. That could be Barclay—or somebody else. The gun don't figure until we know it's Barclay's."

"There's one more possibility," Hale said, "or maybe you'd rather I kept my ideas to myself."

Noonan had gone on record spurning Hale's help and scoffing at his standing as a detective; now he had to spite himself or admit he could use help. He was too good a policeman and he had practiced his profession too many years to hesitate long over his decision.

"Go ahead. I never said I wouldn't listen, did I?"

Hale thought it over. Cody's idea that Kolb had been killed because he was blackmailing, or trying to blackmail, the murderer, he found definitely disturbing, because he remembered very clearly how positive Marion Powell had been that she had seen Mike Kolb make an angry exit from Stephen Allenby's private office.

"Suppose Barclay is also dead?" he said slowly.

"Huh?" Noonan screwed one bushy brow, puzzled.

"You said if this is his gun, he killed Kolb. I say possibly. And just as possibly—if it is his gun—*he* could be dead."

"But that," offered Cody, "would mean that he knew the killer and had to be taken care of before Kolb."

"Perhaps; perhaps not." Hale stood up and stretched. "Anyway, it was just a thought. And it won't help much until you find him. When you do you'll know—alive or dead."

Noonan grunted and said it didn't help much, but there seemed to be some faint gleam of new respect in his eyes as Hale turned away and said he guessed he'd move along. "Okay," Noonan said; then, officially to Cody, "The first thing we do is pick up Fonseca."

Max Hale's idle manner vanished in the hall. He went quickly down the stairs, spotted a drugstore at the corner, and went in to close himself in the telephone booth, looking up a number as he pulled some change from his pocket. Presently there was a click in his ear and a rough voice said, "Yeah?"

"Lee there?" Hale asked.

"Who's this?"

"Max Hale."

There was a pause; then: "He ain't in."

"You can find him, though," Hale said curtly. "And if you're smart you'll hurry. Tell him the police have got the word out to pick him up again. Mike Kolb was found dead about an hour ago. Got that?"

"Sure," the voice said, no longer rough, "I got it."

"And be sure and tell him I want to see him. He can come to my place tonight—and make it late. And tell him he'd better bring the envelope with him."

"Envelope?" the voice asked doubtfully. "Wait a min-

ute. Maybe you better—"

"That's all there is," Hale cut in. "Just tell him what I said. If he thinks I'm kidding it'll be his tough luck." He hung up as he finished, stood for a moment staring thoughtfully at the mouthpiece. The conversation, he knew, would be relayed to Fonseca immediately, and he had a hunch that the man would be sufficiently impressed with the information, and the implied threat, to do as asked.

One other thought rose to plague him as he went out on the street and walked slowly toward his parked roadster. This was the first time he had ever double-crossed the police. Heretofore he had always pictured himself as working with the police. That this had proved impossible was partly due to Noonan's pigheaded attitude, partly to the fact that there were some things he could not confide to anyone—at least not yet. Still there had been no deliberate betrayal until now. He did not like the idea, but he justified it in his mind by thinking about the results. This tip would postpone Fonseca's arrest, but the police would find him in the end, and it was important to Hale that he talk to the man first.

He climbed into the roadster, started it absently, his mind still uneasy over his decision, his eyes cloudy.

Chapter Thirteen: THE MAN ON THE STEPS

SUE MARSHALL shook her blond head firmly and made her voice emphatic in a refusal that she did not feel. "No, I'm sorry, but I couldn't."

"Why?" Max Hale put his hands on her desk and leaned stiff-armed across it. "You've got an evening gown, haven't you—or a dinner dress or—"

"Certainly," she said, a little insulted.

"Okay." Hale grinned, as though that settled it. "Put it on. I asked you to celebrate last night when I *had* the letters; now I want to celebrate because I know I'm going to get them back."

"You don't know any such thing."

"I almost know it."

"How?"

"I'll tell you at dinner."

Marshaling all her self-control, Sue said, "No. I'm sorry, but I'm expected home for dinner."

"Look," Hale said, "I'm sort of a kind of a stubborn guy. When you came here we agreed that you might have to work overtime, didn't we?"

"Yes, but—"

"Okay. If you're going to be that way, we'll make it business. Under this newfangled wage-hour thing I suppose I'll have to pay you time and a half, but—"

"I think I hate you," Sue said.

"—I've got to talk the case over with you, so I guess you're in for it. And leave those cheaters home." He kept right on grinning.

Sue was still exasperated, and fussed and confused when he told her when he would call for her, but as she got out of his roadster with the help of the superior doorman at the Ritz at eight o'clock, she had never felt happier in her life.

Hale, resplendent in dinner jacket and Chesterfield, came around to meet her and said, "Attention!"

The doorman's superiority was replaced by a broad grin. As though this was a routine with which he was completely familiar, he came stiffly to attention, snapped a hand to his cap brim in salute, and said, "Yes, sir."

Hale winked at Sue. "That's the proper attitude, huh?" To the doorman he added, "Good evening, John. Will you have a boy shove the car out of the way?"

John said good-evening and he would take care of the car. His eyes were still smiling as he turned away.

Edward, the head waiter, met them at the door and seated them himself. Hale told him to bring two Martinis and after he had a taste of them he would tell him what else he could do. Edward said, "Very good, Mr. Hale," and bustled importantly away, making brisk gestures in the air which signaled an immediate convergence of waiters and bus-boys to the table.

Hale extended a gold case, and when Sue had selected a cigarette, took one himself. Two waiters struck matches with precision, presented lights with practical flourishes. Sue smiled her thanks, and as she looked about the room, Hale inspected her. She wore a simple gown of dark blue crepe with a flaring skirt, a tight bodice, and a square neck-line. Her straight blond hair was worn in its usual way, and he decided he liked it; he also decided that with her glasses off she was very attractive. Her skin was clear and smooth, and there were some really nice curves to her slenderness if you got around to looking for them.

"Like it?" he asked.

"Yes," she breathed, forgetting to be business-like.

A waiter came with Martinis. Hale tasted his and said, "To crime! May it become less difficult to solve and—"

"And more profitable for us," Sue finished, her eyes dancing at him over the rim of her glass.

He grinned and nodded to the waiter. "One—how about you?" Sue shook her head and he said, "Just one

then. And when you bring it, get Edward."

Ten minutes later, Edward hovered over them. "Yes, Mr. Hale."

"We want some oysters, Edward." He glanced at Sue. "Don't we? Yes. And guinea-hen, Edward. You know the kind I mean?" He shaped one with his hands and Edward grinned and said he knew exactly the kind Mr. Hale meant. "And you know the kind of sauce I want, and you're going to make it yourself. Right here in a chafing-dish."

Sue smiled and sat back and was happy in spite of the fact that one side of her brain told her she was a fool and to snap out of it. It was impossible not to admire her escort, the brusque but affectionate mannerisms, the approving acceptance by those who served him.

She had not failed to notice the way people had looked at him when he entered the room, and though she had never been here before, being with him made the place seem at once familiar. She watched interestedly as he completed his order, and when Edward hurried away, hands fluttering again, they danced.

During dinner he told her all about the things that had happened during the day and how he had put Sam Delemater to work again in an effort to find Adelaide Rankin. Before she realized it, it was after ten and he was calling for the check. . . .

"They tell me there's a new show at the Grotto," Hale said when they were in the roadster again.

"But I've got to go home," Sue protested. "Really."

"Remember," Hale said, "you're getting time and a half for this."

The Grotto was just beginning to fill up when Hale and Sue Marshall arrived. Angelo bowed and gestured

toward a small table near the floor, but as Hale started to follow he saw a bare arm waving back and forth and found the owner to be Marion Powell. He saw then that she was with Bill Carter and the Allenbys.

"Over here, Angelo," he called, and presently two chairs were being moved up to the Allenbys' table.

He was pleasantly surprised to find the foursome in a gay mood; even Stephen Allenby was looking downright affable as Sue was introduced and they sat down.

"How did you get him here?" Hale asked.

"It was like launching a battleship," Lyda Allenby said with a glance at her husband, "but he's standing up under it pretty well."

"He always does," Marion Powell said, "once he gets that stiffness out of his neck."

Allenby grinned good-naturedly and sipped his drink. Hale had an idea there had been two or three before this one, but apparently they had agreed with him. He had known Allenby for quite some time—rather casually, to be sure, but well enough to get the general impression that he was a pretty nice sort. If there was a noticeable stiffness about him at times, it was because he had a certain prestige and background to live up to, and his austerity became more apparent because of his age.

Speculating about this, Hale did not think he was more than thirty-six or -seven, and now that he was enjoying himself, he looked even younger. His slender height was set off by his dinner coat. There was distinction to the high, rather narrow brow, the even framework of his face.

"He was brooding," Lyda was saying, "all over the house. We simply had to drag him out."

"It wasn't as difficult as all that," Allenby said. "As a

matter of fact I thought it was a good idea. With that business of this morning out of the way"—he glanced at Hale—"I was quite agreeable to a little celebration."

He finished his drink and beckoned to the waiter. "Actually I suppose a fellow is a bit of a fool to imagine he can hide things from the police, once they are suspicious of him."

"You held out your reason for coming home early," Hale said.

"What—oh, yes." Allenby's voice was still well-modulated, but he turned hurriedly to the waiter, and Hale, catching a fleeting glimpse of the confusion in his gray eyes and the oblique glance from Lyda, wondered how much she had been told. "Another King's Ransom," Allenby said, "and what about everybody else?"

The others made known their wants and Marion Powell leaned forward, her eyes on Hale. "It said in tonight's paper that Kolb was murdered. Wasn't he the butler?"

"Yes. He was the butler the night of the murder."

"What do the police think?"

"Frankly, I don't think the police know."

"I don't think they know much of anything anyway," Bill Carter said. His blond good looks seemed faintly flushed with drink, but his tone said he was quite sober, and his broad expanse of stiff shirt-front and black broadcloth was immaculate. "At that, they ought to find out about it pretty soon, if they're ever going to. What's this about Lee Fonseca?"

"Isn't he the gambler?" Lyda asked.

Hale said he was, and answered Carter, "They know Kolb used to work for him. They think there might be a connection."

"Is it true," Allenby asked, "that this man Barclay, this Englishman the newspapers have mentioned as being sought by the police, was a client of yours?"

"I'm afraid it is," Hale said glumly.

"How thrilling!" Lyda said. "Tell us about him."

Hale saw that Lyda was in rare form. Her fragile, artificial beauty showed to excellent advantage under the soft lights of the night club. Sleek and shiny in clinging black satin, she was still on the brittle, superior side, but a drink or two had endowed her with a little more humanness. Hale smiled at her and very sketchily explained unimportant details about Harold Barclay.

"But where is he?" she wanted to know.

"I wish I knew."

"So do the police, I guess," Allenby added.

"And I thought we came to have fun," Marion said.

"We did," Lyda said. "Come on." She rose, holding out her hand to Allenby. "It's customary, you know."

They started for the crowded dance floor, and Bill Carter asked Sue if she would dance. As soon as they left, Hale sat down and looked over at Marion Powell. She was, he decided, quite lovely in her glorified peasant frock of white chiffon with its high girdle and tiny jacket. Here, too, the drinks had had an effect—to the good. Her cheeks were faintly flushed, her eyes shining. She did not seem to be brooding any more and he was glad the mood of the morning had passed.

"Life looks better, huh?" he asked.

"Lots better Now if you only had those letters—"

"I'll have them for you tomorrow."

"Really? You know who has them?"

He nodded.

"But weren't they stolen from the safe?"

"Yep."

"Who took them?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Are you getting them from the same person?"

He thought it over. "I'd rather not answer."

Marion made a face at him. "All right, then. But I do want them soon because—well, Bill and I are going to be married Saturday."

"But today is Thursday."

"I know. But Bill's over his grouch now, and he's all for it, and I don't see any use in waiting. I'll be glad to get away."

Hale watched her with steady, thoughtful eyes, as she made designs on the tablecloth with the prongs of her fork. "I'd feel better, though," she said finally, "if I hadn't seen that man Kolb last night." She sent her eyes up at him anxiously. "You don't think Stephen had anything to do with it, do you?"

He made no immediate reply, partly because he was thinking about something else.

"Look, Max," she said, "you're not going to try to do anything about these—these murders, are you?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to. Try, anyway."

"But—I thought you just wanted to get Lyda's letters —IOU's?"

"I did, at first. There are other things now—things that are important to me." He hesitated, eyes a little narrow, a little hard. "For one thing, somebody tried to frame me and I guess I'm not the kind to—"

"I don't believe it," Marion said quickly. "Why?"

"If you don't believe the statement," Hale answered evenly, "you certainly won't believe the explanation."

"But if you keep on—" Marion Powell's dark eyes

were round and earnest, more than a little alarmed. "Suppose Stephen did have something to do with it. You wouldn't—"

"I don't know what I'd do," Hale said, and was grateful that the music had stopped and that the dancers were nearing the table.

As they all sat down and he saw that the others were chatting among themselves, he found himself speculating about Stephen Allenby. Here was a man who would never shirk his duty. The very nature of his training had been shaped for that very thing. Hale felt sure that he would take whatever measures were necessary to protect himself, his name, or his family, according to his standards. With Allenby it would never be murder for profit, probably not in anger; but if he decided such a job should be done, he would do it himself.

Bill Carter, on the other hand, was of an entirely different make-up. He, too, could do murder if he thought it was necessary, but his would be the obvious way. There was little subtlety about him, nothing at all of Allenby's shrewdness or brilliance. And Allenby's brilliance, at least in a business way, had been proved—he had taken a modest fortune through two depressions and doubled it. The comparison held Hale's attention until he realized that someone spoke to him. It was Marion.

"Come out of it," she said, "and listen to some piano."

The orchestra had retired and a big Negro was spotlighted on the piano bench, doing some solo work. Because Hale liked a hot piano, he sat back.

"The guy is good," said Carter. "Very good."

"As good as Fats Waller?" Marion asked.

"Well—"

"Or the one in Benny Goodman's quartet?"

"Teddy Wilson?" Carter shook his head. "Not that good. He's tops for my money."

"But not for mine," Hale replied.

"I like Count Basie," Sue said. "And Art Tatum."

"Art Tatum?" Hale looked at his secretary with new respect. "You sort of know your piano, don't you?"

"Well, I like it," Sue said.

"Basie is all right," Carter said authoritatively, "on that counterpoint stuff. But I'll take Wilson. You can have Tatum and—"

"I'll take him," Hale said. "His right hand is as good as any, and his left is miles out in front." He was warmed up now and leaning across the table. "When he doubles up is when you know how good he is—"

"I've heard his records," Carter argued. "There's too much of that ripple stuff."

"That's for the public—the chumps. Ever hear him play *Lulu's Back in Town* or *Honeysuckle Rose?* When he forgets about the customers and really goes to town? Boy! He doubles up with that left and—"

"I like Eddie Duchin," Lyda said.

"You would," Marion sniffed.

"And what," asked Lyda with some asperity, "is the matter with Duchin?"

"Nothing," Hale said. "He plays a fine piano, but—"

"But not the kind of piano we're talking about, darling," Marion finished.

Stephen Allenby had been left out of the conversation, and he leaned forward now. "This fellow Goodman—" he began in his quiet way—"Benny Goodman, isn't it?—what instrument does he play? Piano?"

A hushed, incredulous silence settled over the table.

Hale peered across at Allenby to see if he was kidding, decided that he wasn't; then the laughter exploded.

"The clarinet, you dope!" Marion said.

"I ask you?" Carter shook his head sadly. "I ask you. You must have seen his picture a hundred times—"

"He wouldn't know a clarinet from a tuba," Lyda said with a long sigh. "Why should he when he can't even carry a tune?"

"Even if he is tone deaf," Marion said, "he ought to know what Benny Goodman plays."

"I do all right on the words," Allenby grinned.

"It's that black wooden thing," Carter said. "The straight one, with the keys—and I don't mean a flute."

Hale listened vaguely, his eyes on Allenby. After his first laugh, he thought of something else. Presently he pushed his chair back from the table and said that since Sue Marshall and himself were working people they would have to be running along. Grinning at the protests, he helped Sue with her wrap. . . .

It was twenty minutes after one when he put his car away and started up the darkened, steeply sloping street to his house. A gusty wind whirled bits of newspaper along the empty pavement, and overhead the stars seemed very close to the roof tops on the summit. Back on Charles Street a car went by and a loose manhole cover banged loudly and re-echoed into silence.

Turning into his own entryway, he unlocked the grilled iron door and climbed steadily, his footsteps muted by the thick pile of the stair carpet. He was halfway up the last flight before he saw the man.

A lumpy, overcoated figure, he bulked enormous as he sat on the top step, motionless and staring, elbows on his knees and his hands dangling from limp wrists. Hale

kept coming. To get out of his way the man rose, turning his head a little so that light from the hall fell upon a sallow face with a scar on the rim of his jaw.

Hale said, "Hello," and started for his door, keys in hand.

"Took you long enough," Scar-face said.

Hale unlocked the door, snapped on the room light, and stood aside to let the man enter before closing the door. Scar-face glanced about, moving all the while and finally disappearing into the inner hall. Light switches clicked in other parts of the flat. By the time Hale had put away his hat and coat the man was back. He went directly to the telephone, dialed a number.

"It's okay," he said presently. "He came back alone. . . . Yeah, unless you see something screwy in the street. Yeah, I'll wait."

Chapter Fourteen: THE TRADE

LEE FONSECA came into the apartment very slowly, hands in his coat pockets, his alert gambler's eyes darting as though looking in every direction at once. Otherwise there was nothing in his colorless, impassive face to suggest that this was anything but a friendly call.

Scar-face, who had opened the door, closed it and slouched back against the thick panel. Hale hoisted himself from his chair, tossing aside his magazine and mashing out his cigarette.

"Thanks for this tip," Fonseca said. "This afternoon, I mean."

"Bring that envelope of mine?"

Fonseca hesitated, eyes inscrutable.

"Because if you didn't," Hale went on flatly, "I haven't

anything more to say."

"About what?"

"Did you bring the envelope?"

"I brought it."

"Show me."

Fonseca pulled his hands from his outside pockets, reached into an inner pocket, and extracted a familiar-looking envelope.

"The inside of it, too," Hale said.

"You're a suspicious bastard, aren't you?"

"But you're not."

Fonseca lifted the flap and took out the IOU's and the four folded notes, holding them so Hale could identify them as he moved up.

"Okay," he said. "I'll make a deal for them."

"I told you I'd trade for my marker yesterday."

"I haven't got it," Hale said.

"Then it's no dice."

"Wait." Hale slid a thick thigh over a corner of the table. "I had to tell Noonan about Kolb—the run-out he gave me and what was in that valise."

"And you think I rubbed him out?"

"No." Hale shook his head. "I don't."

For an instant Fonseca's eyes mirrored surprise; then the veil of suspicion came down and he waited.

"But I think you got the rest of the dough. He only had eight hundred on him. What was it, a ten percent job?"

Fonseca waited. His thin face was tight, with a tautness to his skin that suggested that it had been shrunk across his cheekbones. He had a habit of talking without moving his lips much; and watching him now, Hale had the curious thought that he might make a good ven-

triloquist. The lips moved a fraction of an inch.

"Get to the point, then."

"Okay." Hale reached back for a silver box and took another cigarette. "I said I didn't have your IOU but I know where it is." He went on to tell about Adelaide Rankin. "If what you said the other day is true, she has to be the one. Find her and you can probably get it cheap."

"Where is she?"

Hale frowned and said he didn't know. "Sam Delemater's looking for her now."

"When you find her," Fonseca said, "get my marker and we'll trade."

"We'll trade now," Hale said. "I'm not looking for her to get your marker. I've got something else I want to say to her. But that marker is important, huh?"

"You know damn well it is."

"Yeah." Hale lit the cigarette, studied the burning end. "If it should match the piece Gorham had clutched in his hand, you'd be lucky to miss the chair—guilty or not. And that's why I think you owe me the envelope. I tipped you off this afternoon; I've told you where the IOU is. You've got men who can look for her. Okay, find her."

"It ain't enough for a trade. If I find her and get it, maybe—"

"I want the envelope now," Hale said. "And if you don't like it my way, I'll have to try the other angle."

"Yeah?"

"Um-hum. I've protected you enough. Now I'm going to call Lieutenant Cody and tell him what I've told you. They'll put a hundred men out after that Rankin woman, and they'll find her long before you can. And

when they do they'll get the IOU. I'll have to take my chances with the envelope, but the most I can lose is a client. How will it figure for you?"

Nothing changed in Fonseca's face but his mouth. Like a scar it stood out against his colorless face. Finally it twitched. He spoke through his teeth. "You can't bluff me, Hale."

"You think I'm bluffing?"

"Rat on me and I'll take care of you."

"With guys like him?" Hale's voice was contemptuous as he gestured toward the man at the door. "Maybe, maybe not. But where will you be?"

Fonseca stood tense and immobile, eyes ugly, scrutinizing. Hale met that gaze steadily, a faint hard smile lifting one corner of his mouth. And Fonseca must have realized any other threat would seem a little hollow. He was a gambler, but as such he knew enough to figure the odds, weigh them properly, and play the percentage. In the end it was his glance that shifted.

"I'll play your way—once." He tossed the envelope on the table. "Because you're just the kind of a chump to pull a stunt like that." He put his hands back in his pockets, shrugged his coat collar a little closer around his neck. "Where can I get a line on the dame?"

Hale told him all he knew, and Fonseca said, "Okay. Just be sure you don't cross me."

As he turned toward the door, Hale stopped him, saying, "There's one thing more maybe you ought to know."

Fonseca turned back. "Yeah?"

"Tell that monkey to step outside."

Scar-face pushed away from the door. "Listen, pal," he snarled, "I'm getting a little fed up with you."

"That can wait!" Fonseca said curtly, watching Hale. "Outside!"

"Have they got your fingerprints at Headquarters?" Hale asked when Scar-face closed the door.

"No."

"It's okay, then."

"What's okay?"

Hale pursed his lips, reorganized his thoughts, and decided to go ahead. "You found a gun in that desk last night," he said. "A .38. Remember? Well, that's the one that killed Gorham."

"You wouldn't kid me, would you?"

"That's the gun."

Fonseca looked at him long and hard. "I'm listening."

"It was planted. I didn't know it was there until you found it. But I know it's the murder gun because I mailed it to Headquarters, and they tell me the slug checks."

For the first time Fonseca's carefully fabricated mask cracked. His brows came up and worry fogged his eyes. He stepped close and grabbed Hale by the shoulder.

"Did you wipe it off?"

"I should have, but I didn't."

"But maybe it's got—"

"Maybe it has," Hale said. "I don't know. I just thought I'd tell you. If they nail you, you can tell them where you found it, but it won't do any good because nobody will believe you."

The mask came over Fonseca's face again. "Maybe you're thinking of framing me?"

Hale shook his head. "I'm framing nobody. You spoke about my crossing you up, and I just wanted you to know how you stand. So if you find the Rankin

woman, don't get too tough with her. If anything should happen to her I might—"

Fonseca spoke up to interrupt him. His fathomless eyes were bright hard slits now, but his voice was curiously soft. "Don't do it, Max." He turned abruptly and went over to the door, glancing back as he reached it. "Don't do it," he said in that thin, quiet voice. "I never took a frame without paying off—and I never will."

He went out, closing the door carefully behind him.

Chapter Fifteen: WANTED: A MODEL

JOE RAYMOND, night clerk at the Charlesview, turned over in bed and glared resentfully at the door. Sunlight streamed golden yellow under the drawn shades, and the bottoms of the curtains bellied out with the breeze from the river. The alarm clock on the dresser pointed to ten minutes past ten. When the pounding on the door was repeated, he threw back the covers and stood up.

"A hell of a note," he muttered under his breath.

The murder three nights before had kept him up most of the following day answering questions for the cops, and now this. A guy had to sleep some time, didn't he?

He unlocked the door, opened it, and scowled at the broad-shouldered husky who stood grinning at him. Remembering him finally, he removed some of the scowl.

"Can I come in a minute?" Hale asked.

"Sure, I guess so," Raymond answered without enthusiasm, standing aside so his visitor could enter.

"You remember me, don't you?"

"You're Mr. Hale."

Hale said he was. "I'm sorry to break in on your sleep," he said. "Crawl back in bed if you want to. I won't be but a minute."

He unbuttoned his coat, pushed back his hat, and reached for a cigarette, glancing about the cheaply furnished room as Raymond stood undecided for a moment and finally took the advice about getting into bed. There was a small Victrola on a stand, the under shelf of which was piled high with records. Hale went over, saw that the record on the machine was a reissue of *Margy* by the Original Dixieland Band. Nodding in approval, he gave the crank a few turns and started the record.

"They can still play for me," Hale said.

"Me, too," said Raymond.

Hale glanced through some of the other records, noting that all of them were by swing bands and that some of them were classics of their kind. He came back and sat on the edge of the bed. "What's your first name?"

Raymond told him.

"Okay, Joe. I want to ask you a couple of questions, and after that I want to ask you a favor. If you can help me out I'll send you up a new machine for those records —a good one."

"Yeah?" Raymond looked doubtful "Okay, shoot."

"Can you remember the things that happened the night of the murder? From one o'clock on?"

"Hell, yes," Raymond said. "What I couldn't remember those cops reminded me of."

"You run the switchboard, don't you?"

"Yep."

"Were there any calls from Miss Rankin's apartment?

Take your time, now, but get it right."

"I don't need time on that one. There weren't."

"She didn't try to get Gorham's apartment?"

"There wasn't even a buzz on her line. She might have tried when I was in the can or something, but—"

"That isn't what I meant," Hale said. His eyes got curiously thoughtful as he regarded the pattern of the rug. The record ended and he got up to turn it off. "Okay," he said. "That's one for you. Now, you say you saw Gorham come out about two-twenty."

"I did see him."

"Sure. But he was a little high, huh?"

"He acted it."

"Didn't speak to you, did he?"

"No, but it was him. He came out of the elevator and when I looked up he was walking along the wall toward the entrance." Raymond grinned. "You don't think I could miss those blue pants of his and that funny-looking coat and hat, do you?"

"I shouldn't think so." Hale went over to toss his cigarette butt from the window. "He was singing, huh?"

"If you could call it singing."

"Would you know the tune if you heard it?"

"There wasn't any tune to it."

"Sure you just couldn't follow it?"

Raymond looked hurt; his tone said so. "If I can follow the melody in those jam choruses"—he gestured toward the Victrola—"when nobody's playin' melody, I guess I can follow a tune if I hear it."

Hale stood up. "Okay, Joe. I believe you." He buttoned his topcoat, set his hat back at its usual slant. "Just one more thing. Did the police seal Gorham's apartment?"

"Until last night"

"That's a break. Where's his stuff?"

"Still there, I guess. He had his rent paid until the first of the month."

"Fine," said Hale, and then, as though it was the easiest thing in the world, "Get me a key."

"Whoa!" Joe Raymond blinked and sat up.

"You can get one, can't you?"

"I can get in a jam, too."

"Not with the police—if the room isn't sealed. And as far as your job goes, forget it."

"Says you."

"You believed me when I said I'd send you up a new machine, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but—"

"If you believed that, you'll believe this." Hale stood with his hands on his hips, legs spread a little, head thrust slightly forward. "If you lose your job on account of anything I do, I'll get you another one as good, and while I'm doing it I'll pay you the same salary you're getting here. If nothing happens I'll send you up fifty bucks' worth of new records for the new machine."

Raymond looked at him, frowned, pulled at his nose. He cleared his throat, looked at the battered Victrola, then back at Hale. "Well, hell," he said, "if you put it that way I got to say yes, don't I?"

"And you believe it."

"Sure. I've been sucked in before, but I'll be damned if you look like a liar to me."

"Wrap the key in some paper and stick it in an envelope," Hale said. "Leave it with the elevator boy that's on duty around one or two o'clock."

When Hale got back to his office, Sue Marshall, severe

and business-like in her tailored suit and glasses, told him Marion Powell wanted him to telephone her.

"She's called twice," she said.

"You sent that envelope by special messenger?"

"She already has it. She said so the first time she called."

"All right," Hale said absently. "Get her for me, will you?"

While he waited for Sue to make the call, he went into his own office, closing the door. He put his hat in a mahogany letter-tray and, unbuttoning his coat but not removing it, pulled out the center drawer of the desk and took out a leather address-book. Before he could open it the buzzer sounded and he picked up his telephone.

"Hello, there," Marion Powell said heartily. "I just wanted to tell you I think you're a wizard and I'm going to recommend you to all my friends."

"That'll be swell if your friends get in trouble often enough."

"That can be arranged."

"Okay. But don't forget you owe me a thousand bucks."

"I think it's marvelous. How did you do it, darling?"

"That's just part of the Max Hale service."

Her laugh came lightly. "But you shouldn't have sent the note back, Max. I don't know how you got the envelope—and I know you won't tell me—but it must have meant a lot of work. It was worth the extra four thousand. Let me—"

"Nothing doing," Hale cut in.

"But I mean it," Marion protested.

"I know you do. But I made a special price. A good-

will offer." He chuckled softly. "I'll soak the clients plenty after I get started."

The telephone was silent for some seconds as Hale waited for an answer. He was about to continue when she spoke up again. This time the brightness had gone from her voice. "Have they found that Fonseca man yet?"

"No. That is, I don't think so."

There was another silence. "Max." Her voice was low, faintly pleading. "Will you do something for me?"

He guessed the request and hedged. "I might."

"Will you please not try to do anything more about the murder?"

"What are you worrying about that for?" Hale said, making his voice scoffing.

"I want to get married tomorrow night," Marion said quietly, "and how can I if all the time I keep thinking about you, and Stephen, and wondering what will happen? I'm afraid, Max."

"Don't be silly! What makes you think I'm suspicious of Stephen?"

"I don't know. I didn't sense it until last night. But you are, aren't you?"

"Listen, angel," Hale said, trying not to sound evasive, "I'm mixed up in this thing deeper than you imagine, deeper than anyone knows. I can't pull out now."

"Please, Max."

"That isn't like you, Marion."

"I know, but—"

"I can't promise you now," Hale interrupted, "but I'll make a bargain. I'll get what I want within twenty-four hours or quit."

"I'm going to pray tonight," Marion Powell whis-

pered. "I haven't forgotten how. You've got to fail, Max."

He heard the clicking sound and hung up with a slow, absent motion. Leaning back in his chair, he slid down on his shoulder blades. For perhaps three minutes he stared sightlessly out the window at the thin line of the harbor between the two office buildings on the next street, and although his broad face relaxed with his thoughts, his eyes were troubled and brooding. Those thoughts were not pleasant, but he could not escape their significance. He tried to anesthetize them by sitting up and opening the leather address-book. He went through the pages rather hurriedly, jotting down three names and three addresses on a clean sheet of paper. Under them he wrote: *Do you know Harold Barclay? If yes, wire collect giving your present telephone number,* and then pressed the button to summon Sue.

"Here are three cables to London. These are the names and addresses. The same message to all three."

She took the sheet of paper and started out.

"And, Sue." She stopped at the door. "Look through the classified directory and find out where I can get a model."

"What kind of model?"

"The kind that poses for pictures," Hale said curtly, and he was pretty loud because the pressure of his thoughts still lingered.

"Must you shout?" Sue asked stiffly.

Hale scowled. "I beg your pardon. A male model, Miss Marshall. He should be about six foot one, and weigh around a hundred and seventy. Not any more. I want him as soon as I can get him. And, Miss Marshall," he added as Sue started out again, "after that call the

Courier-Herald and see if you can get Kent Murdock on the phone. I'd like to talk to him."

Sue Marshall hesitated an instant as she backed from the room. She saw now the trouble in Hale's eyes, the tired lines in his face. She was sorry she had snapped at him, and she wanted to tell him so; she wanted to do more than that. To be sure he would not notice how she felt, she made her voice indifferent and business-like.

"Very well," she said. "I'll send the cables first."

Chapter Sixteen: WANTED: PICTURES

AT 1:30 that afternoon Max Hale stepped out of the elevator on the fourth floor of the *Courier-Herald* Building and walked briskly down the corridor to the photographic studio. Kent Murdock, the picture chief, was busy talking over an assignment with a freckled, sandy-haired youth, so he dropped on a chair, glancing about the drab interior. The calcimined walls were a brindle color, spotted with nudes from movie magazines and art annuals; here and there the color had been chipped down to plaster whiteness, and around the doorways were streaky patches where the striking of countless matches had left scars. One whole wall was windows, and aside from Murdock's desk, the furniture was limited to three child's-size desks of battered oak, and a racklike contrivance made of painted iron pipe and supporting a dozen or more coat hangers.

After three or four minutes, the freckle-faced youth shuffled out of the room with a bulky plate-case slung over his shoulder, and Murdock spun around in his chair, leaning back and swinging one heel on the desk top. "So you finally got to be a detective, huh?"

Hale grinned and said he guessed so.

"And they tell me," Murdock said dryly, "that every cop in the state is looking for your first client." He sighed and shook his head. "Well, that's what you wanted, and now I guess you've got it. Maybe after this you'll listen to me. Didn't I tell you that all you'd get was grief?"

"Yep." He had expected something like this when he decided to come here for help, but he did not mind this sort of kidding, because it came from one who happened to know a little about this sort of business and who had made a reputation as a detective on two or three murder cases that even the police respected. Hale had heard the stories before, and the five months he had spent on the *Courier*—until the city editor got wise to him—had given him an opportunity to know, at close hand, the sort of man Murdock was. Although about the same height, Hale had the rugged type of build while Murdock was more slender, with a flat-muscled suppleness that gave him a look of wiry toughness. His face was lean and angular, his eyes and hair nearly as dark as Hale's. He had an easy smile and a way of holding himself that suggested more than ordinary courage of the steady and dependable kind.

"Everything you said is true," Hale answered.

"And you're up to your ears?"

"Yeah. You'd love it."

"What're you doing about it?"

"I'm going to crack it. If you want to play—"

"Oh, no," Murdock said quickly. He shook his head, teeth flashing in a grin. "Don't look at me. I don't even want to know about it."

"You want pictures, don't you?"

"Certainly."

"Take some for me and I think maybe you'll get some later on that will make it worth while."

Murdock's lids came down over eyes that were now skeptical but attentive. "You sound as if you meant it."

"You're damn right I mean it."

"What's the rest of it?"

"Could you take a picture of me here, and then rig it up with another background so it would look as if I were sitting in a—well, say a sailboat. You know—the magazine ads where a girl is on the beach and you know damn well she was in some studio."

"I can," Murdock said, "but not as well as a good commercial photographer could do it."

"Can you do it well enough to get by?"

"Depends on who it has to get by."

"Will you try it?"

"What's the matter with a specialist?"

"I don't want to take the time—and I know you won't talk."

"I'll probably be in too much of a jam to talk, the way you sound now," Murdock said, but Hale could tell by the bright lights in his eyes that he was interested.

"But you'll do it?"

"Sure," said Murdock, and grinned to show he meant it. "Who do I take the picture of?"

"I've got a guy downstairs in my car."

"And what's the background?"

"That part will be a cinch."

Murdock said, "Um-hum" skeptically and stood up. "You're even beginning to talk like a detective." He pulled a plate-case up from beside the chair and put it on the desk. "Is this an interior shot?"

Hale said it was and Murdock lifted another case that stood next to the wall.

"Then I'll need some photo-floods and reflectors." He sighed and reached for his tweed topcoat that hung from the iron rack. "I don't know why the hell I do this. It's hooked up with that Gorham murder, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Now I know I'm a sucker," Murdock said. "Every time I fool around with a murder like this I wind up on the spot." He shrugged. "But—"

Hale knew what the "but" was. In spite of his apparent indifference and his offhand manner, Murdock was interested. Gorham was still page one. Murdock might grumble about the grief and worry, but taking pictures —exclusive ones if possible—was his business and he had no intention of passing up any opportunities.

"Well," he growled, "let's get it over with before I change my mind."

Hale grinned and together they went into the hall.

The elevator boy eyed the five-dollar bill, said, "Yes, Mr. Hale," and could hardly get the envelope out of his pocket fast enough.

"We'll get off at the fifth," Hale said, and after they had been deposited in the hall and the elevator door had clanged shut, he glanced at Murdock. "Just in case that clerk downstairs gets curious."

Murdock eyed him with amused dark eyes and they climbed silently to the floor above, Hale, Murdock, and Stanhope, the model, a tall, elegantly dressed young man, good-looking in a rather pretty way.

Hale unlocked the door and they went into the quiet emptiness of Gorham's apartment. The swank sumptu-

ousness of the front room was garish and artificial in the daylight, and the air was stale and unpleasantly tainted with the smell of unwashed glasses and dishes.

In the bedroom closet Hale found what he sought, the short black dress coat, the distinctive wide-brimmed black hat; there was even an extra dinner suit of the peculiar blue shade that Gorham had affected, although Hale had not expected this and did not know whether it would be necessary.

When he went back to the front room, Murdock was setting up his camera and lights. Stanhope had flopped into a chair and was smoking a cigarette, his pretty face vacant and disinterested. Hale tossed the garments at him, told him to put them on and see how well they fitted; then he went over to Murdock and explained.

Murdock listened, eyes speculative. "I won't guarantee a thing," he said finally, "but we'll get something out of it." He rubbed the angular line of his jaw for a moment, then went into another room, returning with a sheet which he fastened to one wall.

"Is it going to be a posed shot?" he asked.

"Yeah, I suppose so," Hale said, not sure under which category his idea would fall. "But the finished thing will have to look as if the guy is walking."

"Then he'll have to be walking," Murdock said. "I knew you'd make it as tough as possible."

The model had donned Gorham's garments, and Hale, sizing him up from all angles, decided the result would be satisfactory. From the front, Stanhope was Stanhope; from the side, the apparent resemblance to Gorham was quite pronounced. By turning up the coat collar slightly, the effect was even more striking. When he had adjusted the brim of the hat, and the angle of the

hat to the head, he was conscious of a glow of satisfaction as he surveyed the result.

The next half-hour was almost completely silent. There was a question now and then from Stanhope, a laconic answer or suggestion from Murdock as he exposed plate after plate, experimenting with the lights, background, camera angles. Absorbed as he was in his problem, he went about his work with a quick, sure efficiency that left his angular face somber and intent.

"Okay," he said finally, reaching for a cigarette and snapping off his flood-lights. "That's all I can do."

"Just one more," Hale suggested. "An ordinary full-face shot."

Murdock made no comment as he turned and snapped on the lights once more. After it was over and Stanhope had removed Gorham's garments, Hale replaced them. He offered to pay the fellow, but Stanhope said he should pay the agency. Hale gave him $10 and told him to forget where he had been. Stanhope said, "Thanks" indifferently and went out.

"We get the background shots downstairs, huh?" Murdock said as he packed his paraphernalia. "We may have some trouble with that clerk."

"But not enough to bother you," Hale said.

"You hope," Murdock said dryly.

Hale went over to a window and fixed his glance on a distant smokestack on the other side of the river. His broad face was sober and his brows creased faintly along the inner edges. He did a lot of thinking in the minute or so that he stood there, wondering what the last act would be and how he should play it.

Things were beginning to fall into their proper places now. He believed that with luck he might be able to

force a showdown, but there was a lot to be done, and he was not sure whether his approach was the proper one. Heretofore he had blundered on his way, unable to talk with anyone who could help; by choosing a certain line of attack, he could involve himself seriously. The very nature of his weapons and his defenses eliminated the police as confidants and forced him to play his hand alone. He had no one to turn to for advice, and until he had thought about Murdock, had not admitted the necessity for assistance.

With a fellow like Murdock to work with, there was no doubt in Hale's mind of the outcome. Murdock had experience and training; he would keep a confidence and take whatever chances were necessary once he had been convinced of the need for them. Undecided, Hale turned from the window, his frown etched deeply across his tanned face.

"Look," he said abruptly, "I'll tell you about the whole damn business if you want."

Murdock faced him, eyes searching, faintly quizzical as though trying to find a more definite answer. For perhaps ten seconds they stood that way. As though springing from some common fiber of character, each reflected in his way a quiet, unobtrusive strength and hardness that measured up to standard and balanced evenly. Without embarrassment, they eyed each other steadily.

Murdock smiled a little and shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "I've been roped into a couple of murder investigations—and I don't say that I regret it —but my business is taking pictures; always has been. With you"—his brows made a little shrug—"well, it's your job, isn't it? You've got a license that says you're a detective; you ought to find out about it. Play it alone

and you'll know. Maybe you'll make mistakes; so what? I know you well enough to gamble that you'll bow out if you flop. If you crack it"—the grin broadened—"then you can put that license on the wall and know it belongs there."

Hale's crooked smile was warping the corner of his mouth by the time Murdock finished. He should have known the sort of answer he would get. Murdock was that kind of guy. He saw things clearly and said what he thought.

Hale wanted to thank him, but did not quite know how. "Okay. I guess you're right."

"But don't forget," Murdock warned, "if something breaks, the name is Murdock and I need pictures."

"I think maybe you'll get some," Hale said. "And what about these?"

"It'll take a little time."

"Can I get them tonight?"

"You can if that's when you have to have them."

Hale picked up one of Murdock's cases and said that would be swell.

Chapter Seventeen: THE MAN FROM PROVIDENCE

SHANLEY's was a rustic gloomy tavern with stained-glass windows and dark woodwork. Back in a far corner where the gloom was thickest and the ventilation poorest sat Sam Delemater, his *Racing Form* and *Scratch Sheet* spread out on the table before him, a stein of beer near his elbow, and the telephone at his ear. He glanced up at Hale without enthusiasm, spoke into the telephone, and hung up. "Took you long enough," he said glumly.

"What difference does it make?" Hale asked. "You

can pick your losers here as well as any place else."

"I don't mind picking losers. I don't even mind getting photographed out of 'em—much. But when I bring one down in front and he gets disqualified—" He sighed. "Everything happens to me."

"Where is she?"

"Down the street—at the Belleville."

"Come on."

Delemater's pale blue eyes got troubled. "Oh, Jesus, no! I got a parlay I want to—"

"You don't have to listen to it. It'll come in—or run out—just the same, won't it?"

"Yeah, but—I want to get something down in that big race at Havre de Grace. Can't you wait? Hell, I've got three of 'em tabbed and—"

"Which is more important," Hale snapped impatiently, "business or these gee-gees?"

Delemater pushed his sweat-stained hat back a little farther and looked at Hale with one eye that began to wrinkle at the corner. "If you put it that way, the gee-gees."

"Give me the *Form,*" Hale said, and turned it around in front of him as he dropped into a chair. "Which three do you like?"

Delemater had checked the horses in the margin, and he quickly ran down the records of past performances. When he had compared the distances, weights, and track conditions, he circled one called Blazeaway.

"Get your bet down and come on."

Delemater noted the selection, picked his nose, and glanced up skeptically. "How sure are you?"

"He's as good as in," Hale grinned.

"He's eight to one in the line," Delemater said doubt-

fully.

"Is that bad?"

Delemater blew out a sigh of consummate weariness and lifted the receiver. "Blazeaway, Marty," he said. "In the fifth at Havre de Grace. . . . Yeah. Five win and five third. . . . Yep."

Collecting his papers, he gulped half his beer and tossed a quarter on the table. With his decision off his mind, he perked up visibly, and by the time they were out on the sidewalk, he shed the gloom of Shanley's and bathed his lungs in a little fresh air.

"Where do I fit in this set-up?" he asked mildly.

"I may want you for something else."

They walked half a block in silence before Delemater spoke again. "She's really somethin', ain't she?"

"Didn't I tell you?"

"Umph!" Delemater commented approvingly. "Why is it," he asked after a pause, "that little guys like me always go for big ones?"

"Maybe you're just at the right age."

"I ain't too old," Delemater said. "I may be a little on the small side, but I'm good."

Hale grinned and wondered what made such a mild-mannered, unobtrusive man one of the most feared men on the police force. Many times in his career as a Headquarters detective the newspapers had chronicled his exploits of courage and toughness, so that there had grown up about him a sort of legend that did not at all fit his stature.

Because he did not like regulations and red tape he had resigned to set up his own agency; had he applied the same principles and aggressiveness to his own business he could have made a national reputation. As it

was, he puttered around on routine divorce cases or an insurance investigation and kept himself poor playing the horses. Hale thought about all this during the two-block walk to the Belleville and was glad that he had enlisted Delemater. When the going got tough—and it might—he had one man he could depend on.

Adelaide Rankin had taken a room on the sixth floor of the Belleville. When she opened the door in response to Hale's knock she did not act very hospitable.

"Oh—you," she said, planting herself in the opening and hanging on to the knob. "I'm sort of busy right now —could you come back?"

Hale smiled grimly, said, "I won't be a minute," and, without seeming to, pushed forward so that Adelaide had no choice but to fall back out of the way. As he moved past her, followed by Delemater, he added, "And maybe you wouldn't be here when I came back."

"Well, what do you want?" Adelaide said sullenly, closing the door.

Hale had noticed the man who sat in the chair by the windows. Almost at once he placed the fellow.

Adelaide, seeing his stare, said, "I told you I was busy."

The man in the chair started to rise, hesitated in a crouch, finally straightened up. He had a fair, pink skin that flushed to indicate his lack of poise, and his eyes shifted uncertainly behind octagonal-shaped spectacles.

"Hello," Hale said.

"How do you do?" The fellow tried a smile.

"Why don't you introduce your friend?" Hale asked Adelaide.

"Mr. Tilton," she said, eyes resentful, "Mr. Hale—and—I don't know his name," indicating Delemater.

"Delemater," said Delemater. "Sam Delemater."

"Miss Rankin," Hale continued, "and Mr. Tilton."

Delemater said he was pleased to meet Miss Rankin and ran his eyes over her approvingly to show it.

"The last time I saw you, Tilton," Hale said, "you were trying awfully hard to speak to Gene Gorham. You remember me, don't you?"

"Why—yes, I believe I do." Tilton cleared his throat. "You had just finished talking to him when I came to the door."

Hale recalled that Tilton had been pretty nervous and had said he was sure he could straighten it out. What out? Without having the faintest idea of why Tilton was here, he decided to bluff a little.

"You know the cops are looking for you, don't you?"

Tilton paled. "No. Why should they want me?"

"I told them about your conversation with Gorham," Hale lied, "and they've been wondering what you wanted to see him about that was so important."

"He's mixed up in it too, huh?" Delemater said.

"Sure." Hale looked very serious and was glad that Delemater had sensed his bluff and helped him out. "I guess we'd better tip them off, hadn't we?"

"It's what I'd do."

Tilton looked from Hale to Delemater and back again. His eyes showed he did not like this, but he must have realized there was nothing he could do about it.

"You're crazy." Adelaide's voice was curt. "What does he know about it?"

"He knows something or he wouldn't be here. Where's the phone?"

"But," Tilton protested, "I don't know a thing about the murder. It was just a little business that we had—"

"And now you're taking that business up with her?"

Hale said, cocking an eye at Adelaide Rankin. "Well"—he frowned importantly—"I'll tell you what I'll do. Give me the story. If you can convince me that you're telling the truth, maybe we can let it go."

"Don't tell him a thing," Adelaide cried with a note of angry helplessness.

"I think I'd better," Tilton said. "You see—I—er—" He swallowed and tried again. "Mr. Gorham had a check of mine. For nineteen hundred dollars—"

"And it's rubber."

"Not really. I dated it ahead. You see, I come from Providence and was up here when Gorham had his first place. I was drunk, I guess. Anyway I lost that much, and I told him I couldn't pay, but I'd give him a post-dated check. It was due on the eighteenth—"

"Yesterday," Hale cut in.

"Yes. And I couldn't cover it. I wanted him to take my note for thirty days."

"Why? Why should he take it?"

"Oh, I could make it good. But if the check came through now, my grandfather would find out about it. He's president of the Seaboard Bank and I work there. I'll get the bulk of his estate, but we had a row once before when he found out I had been gambling. If he learned what I'd done it would be just like him to cut me off."

"Wouldn't that be tough?" Delemater remarked.

Hale guessed at the rest of it. He opened his coat, went over to the bed, and sat down, puffing his cheeks out a little and saying, "And so she's got the check now?"

"Yes," Tilton said.

"Why didn't you take the note?" Hale asked Adelaide. "You're lucky to get that."

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"You make it too tough." Hale's crooked grin was not amused now; neither were his eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was curt, incisive. "I should have turned you over to the police in the first place. I'll do it if you don't come clean. I think I will anyway. You lied to me before—"

"I did not," Adelaide Rankin argued.

"You said you called up Gorham and he didn't answer. You said you went up there at about three o'clock and found him dead. I didn't bother to doubt you then because there were a lot of things I didn't know."

Adelaide's face blanched beneath the warmth of her make-up. She took a pack of cigarettes from the dresser, swinging her hips about as she walked over to the window. She had on a sheer jersey dress that clung smoothly to her voluptuous figure, and Sam Delemater, who had dropped down on the dressing-table bench, kept his eyes on her. But right now Adelaide was scared and was trying not to show it.

"Well, what of it?" she asked caustically. "Who do you think you are, reading the act to me?"

"It isn't who I am," Hale said, "it's what I know. What did you run out for?"

"Because I got sick of having detectives and reporters pounding on my door."

"You ran out because you knew I'd be back. And right now you're not being very smart. You'd better make up your mind to play ball with me."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Adelaide said, taking care to keep her eyes averted. "I saw a chance to collect a little something to give me a new start.

What's wrong with that?"

"Look," Hale said, keeping down his rising irritation. "I'm going to tell you what happened that night; and then I'm going to tell you what can happen to you. You didn't call Gorham at all; the desk clerk will swear to that. But here's what you did do: Tilton was looking for Gorham. The clerk says he came in just after Gorham had gone out—that would be about two-twenty-five. He went up to the sixth floor. No one answered his ring, and he decided to come down and see if you were up—ask if you knew where he could find Gorham. So that's what he did." He turned on Tilton. "Isn't it?"

Tilton nodded and Hale stared back at Adelaide. "He told you he couldn't get an answer—and that's what made you go up. Now, what time was it when you unlocked that door and found Gorham dead on the floor?"

"It was a quarter of three," Adelaide said sulkily. "Twenty of, maybe. What of it?"

"I'm asking the questions. You cleaned out the safe and then you took that IOU from his hand. It was in his hand, wasn't it?"

Adelaide Rankin's mascara'd eyes were harried. She was trying her best to continue her defiance, but she could not bring it off. "Yes," she said huskily.

"And you took it—as much of it as you could." Hale grunted softly and stood up, his face dark and somber. "Have you tried to collect on it yet?"

"No. I didn't have nerve enough."

"I think you were smart." He turned to Delemater. "Can you get some woman to stay here with Miss Rankin?"

Delemater thought it over and said he could.

"Get her on the phone. Have her come right over."

"What do you mean?" Adelaide asked nervously.

"I mean you're going to stay right here until I send for you." He moved up to her, eyes bright and steady. "You got yourself mixed up in this, and now you'll have to get yourself out. I'm taking no chances of a run-out, and the only reason I don't take you down to Headquarters is that when they find out about that IOU it'll put a man in a spot that's too tough for him.

"You're already an accessory after the fact of murder. I don't know whether you can talk your way out of an arrest or not. Maybe you can if we crack this job. I don't think Lee Fonseca did the killing, but I know one thing: his men are looking for you. Delemater traced you. So will they, probably. And right now Fonseca thinks that IOU might send him to the chair—which maybe gives you an idea of how important it is to him. So you're going to stay right here. And you're not going to open the door unless I send for you."

Adelaide Rankin sank down in the upholstered chair, her make-up patchy and artificial against the pallor of her face, her full, sensuous mouth drooping at the corners. She sat leaning forward a little, twisting her red-tipped fingers in the folds of her skirt.

"All right," she said. "I'll do whatever you say."

Delemater had gone over to the telephone, and Hale turned to Tilton, who stood slack-jawed, dry-lipped, his eyes blinking astonishment and uncertainty.

"I—I won't have to stay, will I?" he asked hesitantly.

"I don't know," Hale said. He believed the fellow's story and right now he did not want to be bothered; neither did he want to involve the man in any needless publicity. "What's your full name and address?"

Tilton told him, and Hale wrote it down, saying,

"Can you prove it?"

"Why—yes." Tilton pulled out a bill-fold, offered a driver's license and an identification card.

When Hale saw that the address checked with the one given him, he told Tilton he could go. The man walked to the door. "What about my check?" he asked tentatively.

"How the hell do I know?" Hale wanted to think of other things and his temper was wearing thin. "Fight it out with her." He gestured toward Adelaide. "If she can keep out of jail."

"I've got a woman coming up," Delemater said. "May Winton. She used to work for Burns." When Hale nodded absently, he picked up the telephone again and gave a number. "Marty? . . . Delemater. Who won the fifth at Havre de Grace? . . Yeah? What was the price? . . . And what's coming up now? . . . I'll call you back."

He hung up, took out his *Scratch Sheet* and a pencil. After he had done a little figuring, he put the pencil away and began to hum softly. "Dum-di-da-dee-dum-dum—you can pick 'em all right," he announced happily, "when you have a little time. That eight-to-one shot came in."

"What eight-to-one shot?" Hale growled, unaware of what had been going on.

"Blazeaway. The one you gave me in Shanley's. Paid eighteen-twenty. Well—" He took out the *Racing Form*. "You don't want me any more, do you?"

"Certainly I want you."

"But somebody's got to stay here until May comes, huh?" he asked hopefully.

"Oh, my God, yes," Hale sighed. "Go ahead. Bet your head off." He put on his hat and looked over at Ade-

laide, who was watching him with dull, anxious eyes.

"Do you want that IOU?" she asked.

"Not me," Hale said. "Not any part of it. You haven't been bright up till now, but you ought to figure out something to do with it if you sit there long enough."

He strode to the door, glancing over his shoulder as he went out. Delemater had moved his chair over nearer the woman and was saying, "Ever play the ponies, honey?"

The clock over the elevators said 4:40 when Hale swung through the lobby of the Siddon Building and ducked into the first car. He returned the elevator boy's greeting absently, and he was still absorbed in his thoughts when he opened his office door.

Sue looked up from her book. When he asked if there was anything new he saw the quick, anxious look she flashed him. He scowled and opened his mouth and she shook her head, as though she did not want him to speak. "There's someone waiting for you," she said, and not until then did he see the inner door partly open.

Before he could reply, Lieutenant Cody and Sergeant Flaherty strolled into sight beyond the doorway.

"Hi," he said. "Been waiting long?"

"Not too long," Cody said. "Nice place you got here."

"It'll do," Hale said. He had unbuttoned his coat and was about to slip out of it when Cody interrupted.

"Maybe you'd better leave it on."

Hale tightened up at the quiet casualness in the Lieutenant's voice. Cody was smiling faintly but without conviction, and there was little friendliness in his tone. It was not unpleasant, but neither was it reassuring.

"You want to take a walk with me?" Hale said dryly.

"That's all," Flaherty said, and seemed rather uncomfortable, as though he was worried and hoped his understatement would make things all right.

Hale stood there half in, half out of his coat. He looked at each man in turn, hunched the coat back on.

"You picked a good time for it," he said flatly. "I don't suppose it can wait?"

Cody shook his head.

"Okay." He glanced at Sue. "If anybody calls I'll be at Police Headquarters."

"Not this time," Cody said.

"No?" Hale was genuinely surprised.

"No." Cody glanced at Sue. "He'll be at the District Attorney's office."

Hale inclined his head. "I'm getting important."

"He thinks so."

"Something new turn up?"

"In a way. We picked up Lee Fonseca a couple hours ago." Cody stepped around Hale to open the door. "He told quite a story. I guess the D.A. wants to see if you can help clear up a couple of things."

The disturbing tightness in the region of Hale's stomach clamped down, and when he smiled at Cody his lips were a little stiff. To show he wasn't worried he made his voice disgusted. "I can hardly wait. I'll probably clean the whole thing up and drop it in his lap."

"It might be a damn good idea if you tried," Cody said, and sounded as if he meant it.

Chapter Eighteen: THE TIME—AND THE PACKAGE

DISTRICT ATTORNEY MCKEEVER was a heavy-set man with a pinkish, well-fed look and soft, manicured hands.

He had the height to carry his weight, and the expert tailoring of his clothes helped to disguise a figure that suffered from lack of exercise. Years of practice had given him an impressive manner and a smooth but aggressive way of speaking that was as effective at a political rally as in a courtroom. If his heartiness was mostly pose, he had forgotten that this was so, long ago.

He was sitting in a high-backed, leather-covered chair when Max Hale came into the room, and to show that he did not intend to stand upon his position, he rose and stepped part way around the massive flat-topped desk to shake hands and wave his visitor to a chair.

"Nice of you to come down. Do you smoke cigars?"

Hale said he did not, and while McKeever selected a fat perfecto and went back to his chair, he noticed that aside from a stenographer there was to be no one else present at the interview but Cody and Flaherty.

"Where's Noonan?" he asked indulgently.

"He's busy at other things just now." McKeever settled himself comfortably and set about clipping the end of the cigar with a gold knife attached to his watch-chain. "There seemed no point in holding him up in his investigation, and frankly, after I had begun to dig into the thing, I decided I had better handle it personally." He paused to suck flame into his cigar. "Do I understand that you are working on this case privately?"

"What case?"

"Why, the Gorham case; and through that, the murder of Mike Kolb."

"Yes, I'm working on it."

"Mind telling me why?"

"I have a client involved—fellow by the name of Barclay. According to the newspapers, you fellows seem to

think he might have done the job. If he did, it won't look so good for my agency. I want to find him."

"Is there any other reason?"

"What's the matter with that one?"

McKeever smiled and spread his hands. He pushed forward in the chair and slid his forearms across the desk top, clasping his hands, but still holding his cigar between the first and second fingers of the right one.

"Why not look at this thing sensibly?" he said persuasively. "You are a man of some substance, some standing in this community. Your family has been identified with the growth of the city for generations, and, with your background, this detective business of yours can't be anything more than a hobby. Come now, isn't that so?"

Hale lifted one shoulder. "It may have been a hobby in the beginning, but for the past forty-eight hours it's been a full-time job."

"Nevertheless it should be quite clear that your duty is to help us get to the bottom of these two murders."

"I intend to."

"That's fine." McKeever put the cigar in his mouth and nodded approvingly. "Suppose you start at the beginning and tell us just what you know."

"Unfortunately," Hale said, "I am not at liberty to tell you at the moment. Perhaps by tomorrow—"

"But tomorrow isn't good enough."

"In that case—" Hale reached for a cigarette.

"That's not the attitude I like to see," McKeever said, smiling to cover his annoyance. "I have the feeling that you know a good deal more than you have led us to believe. You may have some facts that have so far escaped us, and unless you have something to protect I

fail to see—"

"I have my clients to protect."

"Bosh!"

"And certain personal interests."

"The best way to protect your personal interests is to tell me what you know."

"I know very little. I could guess—"

"Then guess."

Hale shook his head and nodded toward the stenographer. "In front of him? No, thanks."

"You make it difficult for me," McKeever said. He was smiling regretfully, but he was having difficulty keeping his temper down. "And, I'm afraid, unpleasant for yourself. I had you come here because I felt we could co-operate and perhaps get to the bottom of this thing. I wanted to hear your story and see if we couldn't straighten out your position and clear up certain points that seem to involve you rather seriously. If you persist in deliberately withholding facts and hampering the official investigation, I may be forced to prefer charges. I understood from Captain Noonan that you were being difficult, but I insisted you be given a chance to tell the truth."

"Yes, you did."

Hale turned in his chair, flashed a sardonic glance at McKeever, looked disgustedly at Cody. The build-up annoyed him. His own stalling was, of course, obvious. Right now he had no clients to protect. McKeever knew it, and knew that Hale knew he knew it. But instead of coming to the point, McKeever had set himself up as a father confessor and his surface benevolence and goodwill were pure sham.

"I don't mind being called down here," he said, "and

I don't mind your questioning me—within your rights. But I resent very much the insult to my intelligence."

"Just a minute, now." McKeever's fat neck got red and he fell back on bluster.

"You didn't have me hauled down here because you liked me or because you intended to co-operate and protect my interests or my name. You sent for me because you thought you had something on me. When you got around to it you intended to put the screws on—in front of a stenographer—so that when you tripped me up you'd have every word of it on record." He leaned back and struck a match to light his cigarette. "Isn't that it?"

McKeever's jaws worried his perfecto and he shot a glance at the stenographer, who was putting down what Hale had said.

"If you insist on taking that attitude," he began; then checked himself. "All right," he said grimly, discarding any further attempt at persuasion. "We have the gun that killed Gorham: fingerprints on that gun tally with those of Lee Fonseca. Fonseca says he handled that gun in your apartment, and he insists he has three witnesses. Do you deny that story?"

"Certainly I deny it."

"Suppose you substantiate that denial."

"Call Fonseca and see."

McKeever blinked, glanced at Cody. The answer stymied him for a moment, but he accepted the challenge, nodding to the Lieutenant and pressing a buzzer on his desk. When the door opened to disclose a plainclothes man, he gave the necessary instructions.

Hale smoked his cigarette with an easy assurance that did not at all match his thoughts. He knew what would happen if he let Fonseca's story go unchallenged. Things

were moving in on him, brought about by his own stupidity in not removing the man's fingerprint on that gun; now he had to meet the issue and beat it back in McKeever's face.

There would be no talk of clients to fall back on this time. No stalling, either. The fact that he had a private detective's license would not help, because there would be no opportunity to be a detective. Until he passed this particular crisis he could forget Gorham and everything else and concentrate on one thing: being a lawyer. And he hoped he had not forgotten how.

The door opened and the plainclothes man entered holding Lee Fonseca by one arm.

Hale glanced up. "Hello, Lee."

Fonseca waited until the plainclothes man withdrew. He stood very still, his thin mouth a mean, hard line. Hate blazed from the small greenish eyes; without seeming to move, they inspected the room.

"Sit down, Lee," McKeever said.

Fonseca took one step, bringing him close to Hale; then he lunged out, swinging viciously.

Hale's dark eyes had never left the gambler's face, and when the fellow took that first step, he got his legs under him and put one foot flat on the floor. When Fonseca swung, he came up, swiveling to one side so that the punch slid past; then he clinched and held the man's arms until Cody and Flaherty grabbed him from behind and yanked him roughly off his feet.

"You bastard!" Fonseca's eyes were wide now, his face gray with rage. "You dirty—"

"None of that, now!" McKeever rapped. "That stuff doesn't go in here. Put him in that chair," he ordered Cody, "and keep him there!"

Fonseca was rammed into a straight-backed chair near the desk. His body was stiff as he grasped the chair arms, but after a moment he relaxed and his eyes regained their customary fixed coldness.

"What's the idea?" Hale asked.

"Mr. Hale would like to hear your story," McKeever said. "Repeat it for him."

Fonseca did so, chewing off his words in that lipless way he had, accenting his vindictiveness with hate.

McKeever sat back, puffing at his perfecto, nodding in approval, and now and then glancing over at Hale, who listened attentively and kept a faint smile of interest on his lips. But there was no smile in his eyes, narrowed slightly by his thoughts; his concentration kept them steady. Not until Fonseca finished did he remember that he had an act to do; from then on he concentrated on making his reactions as authentic as possible.

There was a long moment of silence at the end of the story, and it was Fonseca who broke it. "I told you I wouldn't take a frame. Now go ahead and top it!"

"Well—" McKeever swiveled in his chair to face Hale and dropped his cigar in some receptacle behind the desk. "Now what have you to say?" he asked smugly.

"Just what I said before," Hale said bluntly.

"You deny it?"

"Certainly."

"Do you deny that Fonseca called on you?"

"Nope."

"But you deny the search?"

"That and all the rest of it."

"You heard him say he had three witnesses."

"Who are they?"

"You know damn well—" Fonseca exploded.

"Never mind that," McKeever cautioned. "Give him their names."

Fonseca subsided with an effort, answered sullenly, "Eddie Macklin, Al Jory, and Beano Kreevitch."

"Know them?" Hale asked Cody mildly.

Cody grunted affirmatively.

"Any of them have records?"

Cody cleared his throat. "Macklin did two years—"

"That's beside the point," McKeever cut in.

"Not entirely," Hale said. "I should think you would know from experience that such testimony is often perjured. I have an idea that Lee could get ten men to swear they searched my place if he thought it necessary."

McKeever wiggled his finger. "Don't quibble. The point is Fonseca can substantiate his story. If you can't offer something to—"

"Who said I couldn't offer anything?"

McKeever let surprise come into his soft, smooth face. "Can you?"

"Certainly. Although"—Hale had nice disdain in his chuckle—"I am a little amazed at such an obviously fantastic story." He sat up. "Suppose I take both accusations in order—if they are accusations. First I'd like to prove that I didn't double-cross Fonseca." He turned to Cody. "How did you happen to find out that his prints were on the gun?"

"When we picked him up, we booked him on suspicion of murder. We fingerprinted him and just checked them as part of the routine."

"Oh. Just routine. Then no one called you up or tipped you off to check his prints?"

"No," Cody said sourly. "What's that got to do with it?"

Hale pursed his lips and gave Fonseca a long sultry stare to be sure that this information registered; then he turned back to McKeever. "As for this other story—frankly, McKeever, I'm rather surprised that you consider it, in the light of the evidence. What kind of gun was it?"

McKeever's neck got red again. "A .38 Smith and Wesson."

"Have any peculiarities—aside from the rifling?"

"What're you driving at?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? A .38 is a common caliber and a Smith and Wesson is a well-known gun. Let me go over to Headquarters and pick out a half-dozen or so like it, and put this murder gun among them. Lay them on a table. Do you think Fonseca could pick out the right one and swear to it?" He stood up, began to button his topcoat.

"Just a minute." The flush had come into McKeever's face again and he had trouble keeping his voice down. "In the light of the rest of Fonseca's story, I don't think that's quite enough."

Hale stepped to the desk, put his hands on it, leaned on them. The smile was gone now. He narrowed his eyes and took pains with his words. "I'm a little fed up with this," he said, "but I'll make one more stab at convincing you." He glanced over at the stenographer. "Be sure you get all of this down, son. What time was it when you left my place?" he asked Fonseca.

"You know what time it was."

"Answer him!" McKeever snapped.

"It was seven-forty-five."

"How do you know?"

"I looked at my watch," Fonseca said emphatically, as

though determined to be convincing, "after I got downstairs. And I remember because I had—an errand I wanted to do."

McKeever glanced up and Hale felt the welcome surge of relief. He tried to keep it out of his eyes. He turned quickly to Cody, his voice still crisp and biting. "You came to search my place the same night. Remember?"

Cody did not answer, but his eyes were distressed, the lines of his mouth sullen.

"What time was it when you came?"

Cody shifted his weight and cleared his throat.

"You know, don't you?" Hale pressed. "So does the Sergeant." He nodded to Flaherty.

"Well?" McKeever asked imperiously.

"It was ten minutes of eight."

"Sure of it, are you?"

"Sure I'm sure."

Hale straightened up, held his hands out with the palms up. "Will that do?" he asked sardonically. "Or shall I point out the inference? Cody and Flaherty searched the apartment, and thoroughly, I have no doubt. There was no gun but my own. If Fonseca's story was correct, it would mean that after he left I had to find paper and string, wrap up the gun, address and stamp it, walk downstairs, find the nearest mailbox—which, incidentally, happens to be at the foot of the street on Charles—walk back, climb the stairs, and be inside when Cody knocked." He smiled and completed buttoning his coat. "In five minutes, McKeever? I think not. Not even for a District Attorney as capable as you."

McKeever covered up as best he could, but he was not very graceful because it was something he seldom had to

do. He turned his angry stare from Hale to Cody and Flaherty. He kept it there until they both looked hot and uncomfortable; when he focused again on Hale, he arched his brows and let his lip curl.

"Such corroboration is rather fortunate, isn't it?"

"It seems that way," Hale said.

"Wait a minute!" Fonseca rose enraged. "You're not gonna let him get away with that, are you?"

Cody and Flaherty moved in on him, eager for something to do.

McKeever pressed the buzzer button. "We'll let you put a little more time on that story," he said testily. "That one will do you more harm than good."

Fonseca started to protest, but when the plainclothes man entered he rearranged the hard mask of his face and walked as far as the door before he turned. "Don't get the idea you're getting away with it, Hale. There are ways—" He caught sight of the stenographer, made his mouth thin and tight again, and went out.

"We may have to go into this again," McKeever said, still red-faced, but aware of his position.

"Not this fairy tale," Hale said.

"Perhaps not. But there are still things about this case to be answered before I have finished; things I have reason to believe you know. It won't help you if I find out you've been holding back vital information."

Hale said all right and went into the corridor. As he started away, Cody called to him, moved up as he stopped. "Look," he said evenly, "isn't it about time you stopped kidding yourself?"

"I'm not kidding myself," Hale said, and he was never more serious in his life. So far he had had more luck than he perhaps deserved. McKeever's was no idle

threat. There was no chance of his actually being charged with murder, but his position was serious enough to make a nasty mess and ruin forever any chance he might have to establish himself in a business that became more important to him every day.

"Next time," Cody said, "somebody might forget to look at his watch. You can't always be that lucky."

"I know it."

"I'm the chump on this one—me and Flaherty. And that's okay because it's our fault. Maybe you think I'm crying because you outsmarted me, but—"

"I know you're not crying."

"—that doesn't happen to be it. I've known you quite a while. I think you're a little off your nut, but I always had the idea you had a lot on the ball. Now I know it."

He hesitated, as though trying to get the right nuance to the thing he had in mind. He had his hands deep in the pockets of his neat double-breasted coat. His long face was grim and unsmiling, the mouth a little tight, with something grave and faintly threatening in his steady gaze; yet when he continued, there was no rancor in his voice.

"We didn't want to search your place, but it was a job and we didn't skip anything because we liked you. If we had found that gun we'd have taken you down. There was a package in that stack of mail you had in your hand, but until the next morning, when the gun came, I didn't think much about it. Then I wondered a little." He scratched the side of his neck, his smile wry. "Very neat. And I guess I'm glad you got away with it. But the ice is wearing thin, isn't it?"

"Thin as hell."

Hale knew that everything Cody said was true. He

played no favorites. Where his job was concerned he would not compromise, and Hale saw that he could not explain. He could have used Cody's help, but as a policeman Cody's orbit was governed by prescribed methods and regulations, his procedure limited by the very nature of his work. In any matter that involved taking liberties with his duty he had no choice.

"Maybe you ought to tell me about it."

Hale grinned, his eyes concerned. "When I have something to tell that will do any good, I will."

"You've got two strikes on you already," Cody argued. "I'm working with McKeever now, you know. So if it's still Noonan—"

"It's not that. Not now."

"Then stop horsing around."

Hale shook his head. "All I've got now is ideas. Later I may need some help. If you want to play along—"

"I can't play your way," Cody said flatly. "You'll have to play mine or else—"

"I'll call you anyway."

"Don't dig any deeper."

"Maybe tonight if I'm lucky. Wait until then."

Cody sighed, and said, "I hope you know what you're doing," and all the way down the corridor Hale could feel the Lieutenant's eyes on his back.

Chapter Nineteen: SLUGGED—AND TAPED

DARKNESS had threatened them for the past five miles, and when the road curved eastward before making the final descent on Marshville, wisps of fog began to blow in from the bay to blot out the leaden sky.

Hale switched the roadster's headlights to bright and

the gray mist swirled about them, diffusing the rays and making the beams white and glistening. In the clear patches the asphalt was humpbacked and shiny, and the tires sucked at the black dampness to whine a protest.

Delemater slouched lazily in his corner of the seat, his hands thrust into his coat pockets, his jaws clamped on a pipestem. Now and then he sucked on it, as though unaware that the pipe was out, and Hale could hear the saliva bubble. When the lights of the village blinked through the mist a half-mile ahead he removed the pipe and sat up.

"This it?"

"This is the town."

"And where do we go?"

"About a mile on the other side."

He glanced at the clock on the dashboard as he slowed down and began to roll along the wide, elm-bordered street—7:38. Not bad time, everything considered. Forty minutes. Another fifteen or twenty minutes and he would know whether his reasoning was well founded or whether he would have to go back to Cody and admit that the job was too tough for him. It might well prove too tough, but if this hunch was right he would have something conclusive to work with.

A traffic light stopped him, and as he shifted he saw the village green off to the left, identified the flagpole, the bronze Fishermen's monument, and, on the far side, the clean white lines of the church spire. Ahead, in the two-block business district, cars were parked in angled rows, their noses to the curb. He idled down until he had passed them, and the lighted windows of the two drugstores, the post office, and Handy's Lunch. For a quarter of a mile infrequent street lights marched along with

him, and a short distance beyond the last one he took a sharp left turn which brought him out on a tarred road that led toward the shore-front.

"Summer stuff down here, huh?" Delemater said.

Hale began to slow down again, peering for landmarks, driveways, mailboxes. For a half-mile the road ran straight and level between stone fences and high hedges and open meadow; then it climbed gently over a sandy rise and began to wind through pine trees and scrub oaks. Quite suddenly he braked down and turned up a gravel road between two stone gateposts. A few yards beyond the gate a dirt road angled off to the left. He kept to the main driveway, and presently they were in a clearing dominated by a low-lying house that stretched out squat and black to challenge them.

The headlights made its emptiness all the more apparent. Shutters had been removed from the windows. Burlap covered the shrubs along the porch, and a storm door protected the porch entrance. Hale swung the wheel and eased the roadster around the abrupt curve of the driveway. Circling one end of the house, he came to a stop in the parking space before the garage.

Delemater got out, grunting as though he weighed four hundred pounds, stretched, knocked out his pipe, and yawned. "Quite a lay-out. What's that on the other side, the ocean?"

"The bay, yes."

Hale switched off the lights, took a flash from the glove compartment, and walked directly to the garage doors. There were four—the upper third of each was mostly glass panels and he had no trouble looking inside when he held his flashlight at the right angle. A single beach wagon stood guard over a pile of screens

and screen doors, a portable gasoline pumping wagon, some porch furniture, and some beach chairs and umbrellas.

"No soap," Delemater said finally.

Hale did not answer, but stood back to spray the beam of his flashlight over the upper story of the garage. Here were the servants' quarters, reached by an outside stairway. He went over to climb this, but upon close inspection he saw the crusty dust and pine needles upon the steps and went no farther. Not until he had made a circuit of the garage, stopping to look through each window in turn, did he come back and snap off the light.

"What about the house?" Delemater asked.

"I don't think so."

They stood there silently for several seconds. The smell of the sea and the dankness of the marshes were in Hale's throat and he stared off into the blackness beyond the garage until the mist veiled the lowland beyond. Right here it was clear, but overhead the fog shrouded the treetops and collected on the branches to fall like scattered raindrops, gently, with a broken rhythm that seemed weird and unnatural in the stillness.

"You gonna quit?" Delemater asked finally.

"Come on." Hale took him over to the car.

Backing around, he drove past the house and down to the juncture of the dirt road. Two bare tracks with high grass in between sloped away through trees for perhaps 50 yards; then they were in the open and the dank smell of the marshes was more pronounced. There were about 200 yards of this before the high grass fell abruptly away and the headlights shot out over the black, oily surface of a tidewater river that looked limitless because the fog closed off the other bank.

Hale stopped the car without attempting to make the turn into the sandy clearing which led to a spindly-legged structure jutting out from the riverbank another 30 feet to the left. "Let's walk," he said.

"A boathouse, huh?" Delemater said. "That's more like it."

Hale went ahead with the flashlight.

"Watch it!" Delemater called sharply. "There's another car been in here since it rained last."

Hale turned and within the circle of the light beam saw the little detective pointing to one border of the clearing, beyond which the sand gave way to a more muddy soil. He saw the clear, sharp imprint of automobile tires, guessed that someone had headed in that far to turn around.

"Wonder they didn't get stuck in the sand."

"Didn't go in far enough to get the back wheels off this road. One thing, there won't be any footprints."

A board walk ran along the near side of the building. Hale remembered that in the summer a continuation of this walk formed a jetty and landing stage. There was one window in this wall and he went to peer inside, shielding his eyes against the glare of the flashlight. The dust and salt spray caked on the glass panes obscured the interior, but he made out the speedboat and the hull of the sloop on their cradles; above, spars, gear, and block and tackle stretched out over the rafters.

The lock was old-fashioned, and Delemater made short work of it with his keys, the second one snapping back the bolt. He threw open the door, but stood aside to let Hale enter with the flashlight.

Inside, the air was cold and still and damp. The beam of the flash danced from the polished mahogany of the

speedboat, and the white hull of the sloop was ghostly. Hale kept moving as he played the light about. When he saw nothing at the front except the doors and, below them, the black shine of the water in the boat slip, he turned toward the rear. In the far corner was a pile of cushions and life-preservers. There was nothing under the window. In the corner behind the door was a bundle of sail-cloth, worn thin and faded gray. At one side of it—he had started to move the light away before he saw it.

"Wait!" Delemater snapped. "Put it back."

The beam had swung back as he spoke, picking up something black and shiny and triangular at the far end of the bundle. Hale froze with the breath stuck in his throat and his eyes wide. A faint breeze from the river swept under the doors to eddy across the floor and slide along his ankles and up the backs of his thighs, bringing an odd chill that seeped clear through him. It was only a second or two, that silence; but it held him stiff and tense until he knew for sure that this black, shiny triangle was the upturned tip of a man's shoe.

Delemater's curse snapped the silence. It was a vicious, throaty curse and they moved to the canvas together. The bundle was no longer a bundle, merely a cold gray spread for the still figure underneath.

Hale whipped it off, and as the cone of his light sprayed down, a new tightness knotted his nerve ends and left him a little sick. Delemater began to curse again, this time with a bitter, terrible sincerity. Dropping quickly to one knee, he slid his hand inside the blood-stained vest; then his voice cracked harsh and abrupt.

"He's alive! *By God, he is!*"

"He can't be," Hale said thickly. "Not like that."

"The hell he can't. He is!"

Nausea churned Hale's stomach, but he made himself kneel beside Delemater and lift a dirty hand that seemed icy but after some pressure became faintly warm to his touch. He got his fingers on the wrist. Concentrating, he sensed rather than felt the slight, labored throbbing of a pulse.

Harold Barclay, his ankles and wrists rigidly bound by adhesive tape, was fully dressed in a double-breasted suit filthy with dirt and stains and spots of blood. Across him had been thrown a topcoat, and beside his head was a shapeless felt hat that was dirty but not, apparently, bloodstained. The once lean, strong face was bony, the skin loose and waxen instead of tan; the mustache stood out black and unkempt against the rest of the beard and the adhesive tape strapped across his mouth. The hair was matted with clotted blood which had somehow ceased its flow in time.

"Let's take it," Delemater said, reaching for the flashlight. He stepped to the other side, bent down again to peer underneath the head. "Slugged," he said grimly.

"It's been three days," Hale said.

"I wouldn't give a nickel for his chances. I don't know how the hell he stood it this long."

Hale stared across the flashlight's beam, his eyes fixed, stony. He had hoped to find this man. But not like this. He had been looking for a dead man, would have accepted the fact, but this—

Hot anger began to simmer deep inside him. He did not know how long Barclay had been unconscious, could only hope he had been from the first.

"We've got to get him out of here," he said.

"It'd be murder to move him," Delemater argued.

"He's got to be moved flat, on a stretcher."

"You can't keep the lid on this now."

"I don't expect to. But if I can cover up for a few hours, I can even up for this—and other things. And I think I can do it whether Barclay ever talks or not."

"You ain't going to take chances with him?"

"There's a private hospital about ten miles down the coast," Hale said. "I happen to know the doctor in charge and I've an idea he can hold up notification for a few hours—if I take the responsibility."

"It's up to you," Delemater said, "now that I'm not a cop any more." He stood up and in the reflected light of the flash his blue eyes were no longer mild, his round face no longer smooth and unworried. The hard lines of his mouth and the bright, metallic glint in his eyes made Hale think of some of the things he had heard about him. "I'm in on the rest of this, huh?" he said quietly.

"If you want."

"Okay." He moved to the door. "I wonder why the rat didn't finish him off. Maybe he thought he had. It's hard to tell sometimes whether a guy is dead or alive."

"Or else he didn't care," Hale added. "It wouldn't make any difference anyway—the way he's taped up. And most of that was done here."

"What makes you think so?"

"His hat. From what I saw, there weren't any stains on it. But his head is covered with blood. He may have been tapped once in town, but it's tough to carry a man around dead-weight. A lot easier to have him so he can walk and help out a little."

"Yeah," Delemater said thoughtfully. "Yeah. I've been slugged myself. You're sick and weak and a little

scared; you're easy to push around. This maniac got him down here under his own power with probably only his hands taped, and with his hat and coat on so it wouldn't look suspicious if anybody happened to see them. At least that's what I'd do. Then when they got here, he slugged him for keeps. Yeah." He cleared his throat, spoke apologetically. "I didn't notice the hat."

"There were two parts to the job," Hale went on. "He had to get Barclay out of town, in a hurry. He's been too busy the past couple days to tackle the second part. Dead or alive wouldn't make any difference—although I think you're right, he probably thought Barclay was dead. Only—" He broke off to take the flash and turn toward the front of the building. "There ought to be a boat—a skiff or dinghy or something."

The broad width of the boathouse was slotted by a boat slip which extended back from the front doors for perhaps two thirds of its length, making two broad platforms, with a rectangular well of water about eight feet wide between them. The beam of the flash again picked out the sloop and speedboat cradled on either side of the slip, and as Hale moved along this, spraying light down its slimy sides, he saw the skiff tied up in one corner. It was about nine or ten feet long, looked freshly painted, and held perhaps two inches of water.

"He must have slid it in when he was here before," Delemater said, pointing to a streak of copper paint which had been scraped off on the edge of the platform and slip wall. "And smart too. He was going to be sure the seams swelled up and made it watertight again before he took it outside. Well"—he turned back toward the door—"who's going for the ambulance?"

"I'd better," Hale said; "it may need some talking."

"How long?"

"Inside of twenty minutes. You'd better work on his hands and feet."

"I intend to," Delemater said. He stepped out on the board walk. "And say," he added as Hale started away, "ain't it about time you told me whose place this is?"

"Stephen Allenby's."

"Oh—" Delemater whistled softly. "Him, huh? You got enough to work out the rest of this?"

"I've got enough for me," Hale said grimly.

"Then it's okay here." He turned back into the boathouse.

Hale felt his way across the sand toward the vague silhouette of his car. He made no attempt to turn around, but, with the help of his taillight, backed down the marsh-bordered road, his thoughts heavy and troubled.

There were a couple of telephone calls to be made, and he should be ready. The pattern developing in his mind for the past forty-eight hours was complete now, at least as far as he could hope to have it. In spite of the jar it had given him, the discovery of Barclay had changed nothing. He intended to sound out Cody and offer him a chance to co-operate; if Cody refused to see things his way, he felt confident now that, with Delemater sitting in, he could play his own hand.

He backed into the tar road, shifted, and stepped hard on the accelerator.

Chapter Twenty: PLENTY OF ODDS

LIEUTENANT CODY walked over to the window of his office and stared out into the night, his hands thrust hard into his trousers pockets. After a silent minute he turned

and came back to his chair, kicking it away from the desk so he could drop into it without waste motion. "I'll be damned if I will," he growled.

Hale shrugged, but said nothing, preferring to wait until Cody had done some more thinking.

Delemater, who had been sitting quietly in the chair by the door, finally stood up and with a suggestion of apology said, "All right to use the phone?"

Cody scowled. Delemater ignored him, went over and picked up the instrument, and gave a number.

"Don't tell me you play the dogs?" Hale said.

"Tanforan," Delemater explained. "Those California tracks don't get through until about eight-thirty our time. . . . Hello, Marty? . . . Who won the last at Tanforan? . . . Yeah. What did he pay? . . . Yeah? Okay, check it over and I'll call you back."

"How come," Hale said wearily, "you stop with California? What's the matter with Havana?"

"They don't open there until January," Delemater said seriously. Going to his chair, he began to hum softly.

"Oh, shut up!" Cody groused. "A fine God-damned thing! Playing the bookies from Police Headquarters!" He scowled Delemater into silence, then looked irritably at Hale. "Tell me that again."

"I just want you to go along with me. I think I can crack this thing and if I do—"

"No! I can't play that way and you know it. You say you know things. Okay, tell me. If they look pat enough to make a pinch, we'll make it. If not—"

"But that's no good," Hale interrupted. "You can't get a confession out of this guy by an arrest, by bringing him down here and trying to work him over. He's not the kind. This has to be staged and I can do it."

"So *you* say."

"So I say."

"And you and Delemater know all about it and—"

"Not me," Delemater said. "Just a little."

"—are going to get smart-alecky about it while I stand around and take the fall. How the hell do I know you know anything that's worth a damn?" He snorted angrily. "I don't go for any grandstanding and you ought to know it. So far you've been lucky as hell, and I don't think it's going to last. This is your first case, and you think you know it all and you're going to be damn sure you get all the credit. What I ought to do is hold both of you. I can do it, too—for twenty-four hours without booking you. But I'm not going to bother. Go ahead. It's your neck. If you want to stick it out, okay. Go on, get the hell out of here—both of you."

Cody's voice was sneering and his eyes were unpleasant, because he was sore and this was the only way he could give vent to his irritation. Hale understood this and sat right where he was. Habit was strong with Cody. From his very first day as a rookie certain things had been drilled into him, certain rules and regulations had been impressed upon his mind; experience had shown him the fundamental worth of these things. He was an officer of the law and his job was the apprehension of criminals. For the type of work he had to do his methods were highly effective, but nowhere in the Police Manual was there anything that covered a proposition such as this. Had he been an older man, Hale would not have approached him; as it was, he thought that he could appeal to the Lieutenant's intelligence and initiative sufficiently to make him see that there were other ways of trapping a murderer than the ones the regula-

tions covered.

"Look," he said evenly, "I'm not grandstanding, and if you weren't so hot-headed you'd know it. I'm not trying to outsmart you or anyone else. You're a better cop than I could ever be; that's why I want you along. But you're interested in this murder only because it's a job."

"That ain't enough, huh?" Cody grumbled.

"Maybe it is, but it's impersonal with you; with me it's a little different."

"Yah—"

"Listen. Miss Powell gave me the job of getting some IOU's and notes from Gorham. I got them."

"*You what?* Where?"

Hale went on hurriedly. "You also think that the murder gun was in my apartment. How do you think it got there? Am I the murderer? Did I find it and hold out? If it was there, it was sent to you, wasn't it?"

"You mean it was planted?"

"How the hell else would it get there? *Wait!* Let me finish. A fellow named Barclay came to my office, too. Well, we found him an hour or so ago."

Cody jumped up. "Where? Is he alive?"

"He's alive, but not very. There's no telling when he'll recover consciousness—if ever."

"Well, where is he?"

Hale shook his head.

Cody stood over him, his eyes unpleasant. "You'll tell me or I'll hold you until you do."

Again Hale shook his head. "I'll tell you, sure. But if I told you now it might hit the newspapers before I got a chance to use that information. I want to tell about Barclay where it will do the most good."

He stood up and Cody had to step back to get out of

his way. They faced each other like that, their noses about six inches apart.

"The reason I'm telling you these things is that I want you to know I'm not trying to kid you along. I know a lot more about this case than you think. What the hell is the matter with you, anyway? If I was trying to outsmart you, would I bother to come here? I didn't have to, you know. I didn't have to tell you a damn thing until after I'd played my hand out." He shook his head disgustedly. "What do I have to do to prove I'm on the level with you—come in and dump the killer in your lap?"

When Hale talked like that, you believed him. Cody's impulsiveness gave way to reason and he stood there several seconds watching the steady eyes that held his. "What am I supposed to do?" he asked surlily.

"I'm having some people at my place. I intend to tell them the whole story and I think I can expose the murderer—and in such a way that there won't be any doubt. I want you there to witness—"

Cody blew the idea right out of the building with an angry blast. "No!"

"I think I've got enough facts," Hale went on, ignoring the reply, "to prove my theory. If I'm right, you're there to make a pinch, and, believe me, I won't be worrying about grabbing the credit. Even if I'm wrong, you'll have a hell of a lot more information than you've got now. Cody, what can you lose?"

"I can lose my job. If the thing backfires I'll be held responsible."

"Ah—" Hale snorted his disgust. "Damned if you don't talk just like Noonan." He started to turn away, but swung back for a final argument. "Come unofficially, then. I'll explain it. You'll just be my guest and

don't have to know a thing about it."

"You're out of your mind."

"Okay." Hale sighed and glanced at Delemater. "But just to show there isn't any hard feeling, here's what I'll do. Give me two hours. That's all I need."

"A lot can happen in two hours."

"A lot will happen—I hope," Hale said. "But it shouldn't worry you. If I hadn't come here, you'd be in a movie for two hours. This way you won't have to wait long for the story. You'll get it, too. If I flop, you can go to work with a head start."

"Suppose you don't flop?"

"Well—" Hale grinned—"then it will be all over but the technicality of arrest. I'll even save that for you."

"No."

Hale sighed and turned away.

"I can still hold you," Cody said stubbornly.

"Sure you can," Hale agreed. "But if you want it that way, then I've got to give the story to the newspapers. I know most of the boys and I've worked for most of the city editors. If holding us makes this other thing too late, it won't look so good."

"We can find Barclay, you know," Cody argued. "If he's in a hospital—and he must be from what you say—we can find him."

"Sure you can. Well, come on, Sam. I've done the best I can. We'd better get started—"

There was a faint twinkle in his eye as he glanced at Delemater and started for the door. As he opened it he heard a curse from Cody and looked over his shoulder.

"Wait a minute!" Cody had grabbed his hat and was jamming it viciously on his head. "Hell, I must be slipping. I'm getting so I'd argue with Santa Claus."

"Official or unofficial?" Hale asked.

"Official if you win and unofficial if you lose," Cody replied with a wry grin. "I like plenty of odds."

"Me too," said Delemater.

Chapter Twenty-one: THE MAN HALE MEANT

BY TEN o'clock the people Hale had invited were gathered in the living-room of his apartment, and he was about ready to get down to business. Drinks had been passed around. The bar wagon, complete with whiskies, glasses, ice, and soda, stood handy, and the guests were making themselves as comfortable as they could, considering their obvious curiosity.

Lyda Allenby and Marion Powell sat in the middle of the huge divan, with Stephen Allenby on the outside of his wife, and Bill Carter, who had tossed his topcoat over the opposite arm, sitting beside it and next to Marion. Adelaide Rankin kept a sullen, superior expression on her painted face as she leaned back in the club chair, and Joe Raymond, the hotel clerk, perched uncomfortably on the Windsor chair by the desk, holding his glass in both hands. Cody watched glumly from the window bay. Delemater had tipped back in a chair near the door.

"I thought this would be a little more pleasant than Police Headquarters," Hale began easily, "and I knew you'd want to know the solution, since all of you were involved in the murder of Gorham, at least in some slight degree."

"Solution?" Marion Powell sat up a little, her smooth young face serious, her eyes disturbed. "You mean you know who killed him?"

"Why, yes," Hale replied casually. "And I should say at the start that Lieutenant Cody"—he glanced over to note the Lieutenant's sour expression—"is here unofficially. He had no way of knowing what I was letting him in for, and although he may resent my deception, I hope he will hear me out." He put his glass down.

Marion Powell had leaned back, but without relaxing her concerned expression. Bill Carter watched him with a half smile on his face, and both Lyda Allenby and her husband seemed a little bored.

"At the beginning, of course," Hale said, "I thought—and so did the police and certain others—that I was the one who discovered the body at some time after four-thirty. I had received a telephone call about an hour before, saying my office had been broken into. The call was a phony, but I won't stop to explain why. I went to the office, found that the filing cabinet had been forced open, and that an envelope entrusted to me by Harold Barclay had been stolen."

He explained about Barclay's first visit, and the threat he had made, adding, "So naturally I called his hotel first. When I got no answer I went up to Gorham's—on a hunch. He had recently been in England and might possibly be the man Barclay referred to. Gorham's apartment was locked. When I couldn't get an answer to my ringing, I went down to see Miss Rankin." He looked over at her and got a hostile stare in return. "But for some reason I didn't think she had been in bed long, and when I felt of a bulb in a floor lamp and found it warm, I was sure of it. I wondered about it, but it did not seem important at the time because I was more interested in finding out about Gorham."

He paused to pick up a cigarette box and pass it

around, selecting one himself and continuing before he lit it. "When the police questioned Raymond"—he indicated the clerk with a nod of his head—"the answer seemed obvious. Gorham had left the hotel at two-twenty. Therefore he had been killed some time after that, and with the Medical Examiner's preliminary guess at the time of death, I thought he had been killed very shortly after he left, probably within fifteen or twenty minutes."

He glanced over at Cody. "As I remember, the doctor said Gorham was killed between one and three-thirty. Was that time narrowed down any after the autopsy?"

"Yeah," Cody grunted. "He put it between one-thirty and two-thirty."

Hale nodded and said, "Believing that Barclay had overreached in his desire for vengeance and done the killing, I thought Gorham had been induced to leave his apartment, had possibly been forced to return the back way, and had been killed there. But one thing bothered me—the condition of Gorham's clothes."

"What about them?" Cody asked.

"He had been hit on the head and there could have been a struggle, which would explain the disarray of the coat and trousers. But that didn't account for the blood. The doctor said death had probably come very quickly after the bullet hit him, and to me it seemed that the blood-stains should have been more or less concentrated. Instead, the whole front of Gorham's coat and vest was stained, as though he had been moved by someone after he had been shot, probably after he was dead.

"The only explanation I could make at the time was that Gorham had been carried into his apartment after

he was dead, although I found this solution hard to accept, because it did not seem to me that a man of Barclay's build could manage a job like carrying Gorham up the stairs and into the apartment." He struck a match and lit his cigarette, blowing out the flame with a stream of smoke. "But it was possible, and I had to accept it until I finally learned the truth. Not only was Gorham killed where he fell, he never left the apartment."

There was a long moment of silence and Hale waited, watching Allenby, who looked right back at him without batting an eye.

Then Bill Carter gave a snort of derision. "Somebody's crazy."

"You're mistaken, Mr. Hale," Raymond spoke up. "I saw him."

"You're positive, aren't you?"

"Of course I am."

Hale opened a table drawer, pulled out the stack of photographic prints Murdock had given him, and selected two. "But he didn't speak to you."

"No."

"And you didn't get a good look at his face."

"But it was him," Raymond said stubbornly.

"Is this the way he looked?" Hale asked, handing Raymond a picture of a tall slender man who, in profile, looked as though he had just stepped from the partly visible elevator door and was walking across a lobby.

"Hey!" Raymond looked up, eyes popping. "That's him!"

Cody stepped up to glance over the clerk's shoulder, but said nothing.

"Is it?" Hale asked.

"Sure it is. Look at the coat and hat. How could I

miss 'em? I don't know when you took it, but that's how he looked that night. That's our elevator. I can almost see him stagger. I can't tell if the pants are blue but—"

"Would you dare say in court this was Gorham?"

"Yes." Raymond frowned solemnly. "I'd swear it was him—or his twin."

"Look at this." Hale held out a second photograph that looked as though it had been taken in the same spot but with front view, showing the face of Stanhope, the model.

"Is that the—" Raymond gulped and tried again. "What's the idea?" he said defensively. "That ain't him. You tryin' to cross me up?"

"I'm just trying to show you that you can't swear that you saw Gorham that morning. You saw the hat and coat, and pants; you saw the same build, but you didn't see Gorham."

"Well—" Raymond moped a bit. "Maybe I couldn't swear it, but—"

"It wasn't Gorham," Hale said.

"How else do you know?" Cody asked curtly.

"I'll tell you." Hale tossed the pictures on the table and put out his cigarette. "The man came out with Gorham's clothes on because he was desperate and had to take a chance. He could prevent the clerk from seeing his face by staggering out of the elevator backward if necessary. But suppose Raymond spoke to him? How could he ignore him except by pretending to be drunk? And to make the imitation good he sang a bit of a song in what he thought was a drunken way."

"Well?" Cody said.

"The only trouble was that Raymond here says he couldn't recognize the tune. The words were okay, but

there was no melody." He glanced at the clerk. "And Raymond is a hot-record fan and ought to know a tune when he hears one."

"Suppose he was drunk," Cody argued.

"A man who can sing can sing drunk or sober. Maybe not quite so politely, but if he can manage *Sweet Adeline* when he's sober, he'll have little trouble with it when he's drunk. Gorham had a good voice. I heard him sing the night he was murdered. The man who wore his clothes couldn't sing at all. He was tone deaf. That's why Raymond couldn't recognize any tune. There wasn't any."

Marion Powell sucked in her breath, sat very still.

Lyda Allenby stiffened with eyes wide and lips parted. She gave her husband a quick, horrified glance and looked back at Hale, her painted mouth moving before the words came tumbling out. "I don't believe it!" she cried. "You're only guessing—"

Allenby's background and training stood up magnificently. With incredible composure, he put a hand on his wife's arm, and she stopped as suddenly as she had begun.

Cody was scowling a little, but he was staring right at Allenby. Hale watched the stiff, impassive mask of his face a moment before he glanced at Marion Powell. A whiteness about her lips, and the bitterness and scorn in her gaze, made him flush and look away.

"Another fellow entered the picture about here," he went on before there was an interruption. "His name doesn't matter right now, but he's the man who came in just after the fake Gorham had gone out." He nodded at Raymond. "He was the second man who came in that morning, the one with the funny-shaped glasses—re-

member?"

"Yeah, I remember," Raymond said in an awed voice.

"He went up to see Gorham. He rang the bell and nobody answered; yet all the time the buzzer was ringing, an impostor was in that apartment. A sweet spot, huh? He was taking Gorham's clothes off, changing them back, putting on his own, and sweating and wondering if he had locked the door."

Hale went on rapidly then, his speech clipped, accented, because he wanted to drive home each little thing he said. "But the buzzing finally stopped. The man inside waited. The fellow on the outside decided Gorham was out and left, to go down to her room"—he cocked an eye at Adelaide Rankin—"and ask her if she knew where Gorham was. The impostor made up his mind to take a chance, forced himself to look into the hall; when he found it empty, he hurried down the stairs and out the back way."

"You're still guessing," Cody snorted.

"Am I?" Hale glared back at him, then wheeled on Adelaide Rankin. "The man who came to see you was there about five minutes. No longer, because Raymond says he was upstairs not over ten minutes all together. Now, how long was it before you went up and found Gorham? Think about it if you want to, but don't outsmart yourself this time."

Adelaide did not think about it long. Her face was chalky under make-up that stood out on her cheeks in crimson patches. "I went right up," she answered sullenly.

"Twelve or fourteen minutes after Gorham was supposed to have walked through the downstairs lobby," he told Cody, "she found him dead on the floor. Your Ex-

aminer's man is ready to testify that death occurred between one-thirty and two-thirty, but you still think Gorham went out at two-twenty, huh?".

Cody did not answer Hale; did not even look at him. Instead he had moved a step or two away from the windows and was watching Allenby. "You came in to see Gorham at about five after two."

Allenby looked up at him, the line of his mouth contemptuous, his gray eyes cold. "That's right."

Hale could not but admire the poise and self-control that enabled him to keep his voice so level.

"But instead of talking to him, you shot him!"

"He didn't!" Lyda Allenby's voice was shrill and hysterical. "He didn't!"

If Cody was aware of her he gave no sign. His tone was low and even as he continued. "Then you saw what you were up against. You got out as fast as you could—to establish that alibi with the clerk in case we traced you. *You came in the back way, changed into Gorham's clothes, went out again—as Gorham. Then you came up the back stairs again. You changed to your own clothes, went out the back way, and hurried to your hotel.*" He glanced at Hale. "Is that what you mean?"

"Wait!" Bill Carter leaned forward, a scowl on his face, his voice disdainful. "If you're trying to say Stephen killed Gorham you're crazy. All you've got is theory and nobody'd believe you in a million years."

"Of course they wouldn't," Marion Powell said. "I never heard such utter rot." She went on with a little more of this in the same ridiculing tone; Hale knew this was her attempt to shame them into acknowledging the idea too fantastic to be considered. "Why should Stephen want to kill him? Because Gorham had my

IOU's?" In spite of her tortured eyes, she made her voice right as she spoke.

Cody was a little bewildered. He looked over at Hale and scowled. "Well, what about it?"

"Let me finish," Hale said. "This is my party, and since I've got to be responsible, suppose you let me do the dirty work." He returned Cody's gaze steadily. "That was the idea, wasn't it?"

Cody said something under his breath and went back to the window. Hale turned to continue, noticing that in all this interruption Stephen Allenby had not said a word in his defense. "There's one thing you ought to know, Steve," he said. "We found Harold Barclay this afternoon."

"Where?" demanded Cody from the windows.

Answering, but keeping his eyes on Allenby, Hale said, "In your boathouse—at Marshville."

For the first time, reaction gripped Allenby's face, leaving it stiff and chalky.

Lyda made a pitiful, gasping sound and grabbed her husband by the arm so hard her red-painted nails sank out of sight in the cloth of his coat. "No! No, Stephen!"

Allenby kept his eyes on Hale. "Suppose we wait and see what else Max has to offer," he said hoarsely.

Lyda looked at him in horror, her lashes pinned tight against her brow; then she sobbed convulsively and buried her face in her hands.

Hale hated himself, but he saw no other way. He fought down the impulse to cut it short; he thought he was right, but he had to be sure. He hurried on, still conscious of the scorn and contempt in Marion Powell's eyes.

"He's still alive," he said. "Unconscious, and there's

no way of telling how long he'll stay that way. He's at Plymouth now—Doctor Carey's hospital."

Cody jumped up and looked quickly about, heading for the telephone near the door.

Hale watched him snatch it up and bark out a number, then went on with what he had to say. "According to the doctor, he's got a chance to live; and there's a much better than even chance that if he dies he will be conscious first. I'm expecting a call. I thought you all ought to know. Also Delemater found some excellent tire tracks in the mud near by. Within a few hours we should be able to get casts and have them checked.

"However, right now I have only one more question to ask. There is another one, but it can wait. This one I want answered." He hesitated, eyes steady. "You came up to Gorham's apartment about five after two or so. The door was unlocked. After you had pressed the buzzer you tried it. Then you went in—and you found Gene Gorham dead on the floor, didn't you?"

Allenby's mouth had the immobility of marble when Hale spoke, but all of a sudden it dissolved, opening a little and closing again, but saying nothing. Hale waited long enough to hear Cody finish his staccato orders and bang down the receiver; then he said:

"Don't be a damn fool, Allenby! Lyda didn't kill him. She didn't even go in there!" He punished the table with his fist. *"He was dead, wasn't he?"*

"Yes." Allenby uttered a little sigh, and his voice was very low and tired. "Yes, he was dead."

Hale blew out his breath, realized he had been leaning forward, and straightened up. Off to one side he heard Cody making noises in his throat.

"What is this?" he demanded. He grabbed Hale's

arm and spun him around. His face was red with frustration and his eyes were ugly. "You spend twenty minutes building up Allenby as the killer. Now you're telling him to say he didn't do it."

Hale pulled his arm away. "I didn't build him up as a killer. But I knew he'd never tell the truth unless we forced him, made it look so tough he'd have to admit he was there and that Gorham was dead before two-ten. That's the truth, and it fits. The man who came up the back way and shot Gorham—"

He swung about, stepping forward. He was about four feet from the divan. Bill Carter held a gun in his hand, and the bunched topcoat on the divan arm told Hale where it had come from. He stopped right where he was and stood very still.

"You must mean me," Carter said.

He was very careful in getting to his feet, never relaxing his vigilance, keeping the gun pointed right at Hale's chest. A smile was on his blond face, a twisted, lop-sided smile, stiff and ghastly and rather horrible. When he slid around the arm of the divan, he put his back to the wall and stood there facing the room with the gun and the smile, and blue eyes that were bright and feverish.

Chapter Twenty-two: A LITTLE BULGE

THE room was very still those first few seconds. No one moved, no one seemed to breathe. They all looked at Carter and he looked back, with his eyes alert and gun steady. Hale stood rooted to the floor, and with the lifting of his surprise and the release of his thoughts, trouble and worry settled bitterly upon him.

He had not figured on this—not yet. That Carter

might be difficult was his reason for bringing Delemater along. That Carter should act so quietly, so calmly, caught him unprepared. He had moved toward the fellow, intending to be right over him when he made his accusation. Even then he had not expected trouble. There was more of his story to tell, and he had thought Carter would bluster and deny, and only as a last resort make an attempt such as this.

But Carter must have known from the way things were going that there could be only one answer. Hale knew he should have been forehanded enough to prepare for any contingency. Carter was never subtle; everything he did was obvious and direct. The murders proved it, and this quick offensive thrust was completely in character.

In the end it was Cody who broke the silence. But even then he was not sure what the score was. "Put it down!" he rapped. "Until we find out where we stand."

With the tension broken, the others came to their feet. Delemater was over by the door, hands in his pockets, his round face unworried. Adelaide Rankin and Raymond, the clerk, merely stared from Cody to Carter. Marion Powell seemed to sag a little, as though the vitality had been drained from her body. She looked older, and tired, but she had a grip on her emotions and there was no fuss.

"I'm sorry, Bill," she said dully. "That's why you were so insistent, wasn't it?"

Carter wouldn't look at her. "It's okay," he said. "I know how to finish it up."

"Put it down!" Cody said, and started forward.

"Stay where you are!"

Cody slowed a little, but did not stop. "Waving that

thing around won't get you anywhere—"

"You'd better stay away," Carter said. "I've got no compunctions about shooting a cop."

Hale took one look at the tight, warped smile and believed him. "Hold it!" he told Cody. "This is my party."

"Yours and mine," Carter corrected.

Unexpectedly, Lyda Allenby brought release. Her pose was gone now. She was no longer superior or arrogant or brittle, she was just a woman with all little affectations stripped clean. Strangely oblivious of what was taking place, she gave a little sob and turned to Allenby, burying her head against his shoulder and clutching him tightly so that he was pulled forward and had to hold her to him.

"Oh, Stephen," she sobbed, "darling."

"It's all right," Allenby said huskily, "it's all right."

Everyone looked at them but Carter, and everyone was quiet again, so that although Lyda was hardly whispering, every word was distinct. "It must have been you —in that elevator. You saw me go downstairs and thought—"

"No," Allenby protested, "I didn't think that—"

The words trailed off. Ashamed before emotion so raw and naked, Hale looked away. Ignoring Carter, he stepped to the bar wagon and poured a little whisky and water into a glass.

Allenby's eyes thanked him as he accepted it for his wife. "Drink it, dear," he said. "That's fine."

Color awakened slowly in Lyda Allenby's cheeks. She breathed a thank you as she handed Hale the glass.

He found he had to clear his throat a little when he spoke. "You didn't try Gorham's door, did you?" She shook her head and he glanced at Allenby. "It was un-

locked?"

"Yes."

"You locked it when you went out the last time, and you must also have put the IOU in Gorham's hand."

Allenby dropped his gaze. "I didn't see it at first. It was on the desk."

"If Carter had seen it," Hale said, "and put it in Gorham's hand, you probably wouldn't have done what you did."

"I didn't see it until I had finished and was looking around to make sure I hadn't left anything. I—I guess I was in too much of a panic to realize what a scurvy trick it was. All I thought of was covering up—"

"That can wait!" Cody cut in angrily, unable to stand the digression any longer and anxious to get at something he understood. "You," he said to Carter, "put that gun down or I'm coming after it!"

"Stay where you are if you expect to live," Carter said.

Cody worked his lips silently, but his eyes were measuring distances. He looked over at Delemater and said, "What do you say, Sam?"

"I'm for it." Delemater took his hands out of his pockets.

"Wait, damn it!" Hale yelled. "There are nine people in this room!"

Cody knew what Hale meant, and looked worried again. Not for himself, because he was not built that way, where his duty was concerned. As he fumbled for an answer, Carter spoke up.

"That's just what I was thinking."

"You haven't a chance, Bill," Hale said. "Why—"

"I don't want a chance." He shifted the gun ever so slightly. Something in his tone tugged at Hale's nerves,

and things began to tighten up inside him. "And I was just about to suggest that we clear out this room. If that gives you the idea that I'm going to make a break for it, forget it. What I've got to do I can do right here."

"Bill!" Marion Powell's voice flared harshly. "You can't, Bill. Bill, look at me!"

Carter kept his eyes on Hale and shook his head. "The rest of you go in the other room," he said.

They all began to talk then, Cody, Lyda, Marion; even Allenby tried to argue with the man in that reasonable, intelligent way of his.

Carter listened to quite a lot of it, but his crooked smile was constant as he shook his head. "You'd better go," he warned, "unless you want to stay and watch it."

"Please," Hale said to the others.

"I won't!" said Marion Powell.

"Sure you will," Hale said. "Look, the minute he shoots at me, Delemater and Cody are going to try to shoot back. There'll be some bullets flying around. Why should anyone else take chances?"

"There won't be any bullets flying around from me," Carter said. "Just one for you and one for me."

For the first time Hale understood clearly what Carter had been trying to say. Studying the bright, almost glassy look in the blue eyes, he was amazed that he had not realized it before. Carter was not going to shoot and run; he was going to shoot and take the same thing himself. For a fraction of a second, Hale fought the idea. It was ridiculous, fantastic. Things like that didn't happen. Not here, and with people like these. But—things like this did happen, had happened before. Suicide was no monopoly to be claimed only by the poor and broken in health, nor was murder. Hale saw that the idea was

not fantastic at all. If there was any place in the scheme of life for suicide, Bill Carter had ample justification.

The things that mattered to him—money, position, idleness, and the pursuit of pleasure—were gone forever; there could be no pardon or commutation of sentence. Death was inevitable, and his choice lay between the quick and merciful kind, and the demoralizing ordeal of trial and prison and, after months of living the final moments, the death-house. It was not strange that Carter wanted to repay the one who had signed his death warrant. The chilled vaccum expanded slowly inside Hale, but, with realization, some of the tenseness went out of his muscles, and his mind was clear and alert. He noticed that Cody was speaking.

"Look, Carter. You're off your nut. You'll have your chance in court. So far I haven't heard any conclusive proof of your guilt. Get smart!"

There was no doubting the earnestness of Cody's effort, but he never was much of an actor and his bluff fooled no one. Probably because he had nothing to bargain with. Of all threats, the one of death is generally strongest. To a man who hoped to run, Cody could have been convincing, perhaps; to this man there was no threat left that mattered.

"I'll give you two minutes," Carter warned. "Two minutes to clear the room."

Hale glanced at Allenby. He nodded, gray eyes troubled and worry creasing his brow; then he spoke softly to Lyda and Marion and took their arms.

"I won't!" Marion cried. "No!"

"Yes, you will," Hale said. He grinned at her and made his voice confident. "Give me a chance to work this thing out."

Allenby's pressure was constant, and very slowly Marion and Lyda began to move across the room. Hale kept the crooked grin on his mouth. He knew the price of failure, but he had not failed yet, and it seemed the best procedure was to take the play away from Carter—pretend there were still many things to be settled.

"Go ahead, Adelaide. You, too, Raymond."

Adelaide Rankin stood up. She seemed less frightened now than before. Folding her mink coat about her magnificent body, she stared scornfully at Carter.

"All right," she said to Hale, her faintly husky voice blunt and disdainful, "but if you let him get away with it, you're a bigger chump than I thought."

That speech helped establish the mood for Hale more than anything else, and he said, "One thing I want to ask you. Did you get rid of the IOU?"

"You bet I did."

"Where?"

"Right down the—well, where do you think?"

Hale said that was fine, and called to Allenby, who was now approaching the doorway to the inner hall. "Steve, one thing more, please." He turned as Allenby stopped, and looked at Carter, keeping up his act and doing a pretty good job. "You don't mind, do you, if I get these things straightened out in my mind first?"

Carter was not quite prepared for such casual acceptance. He seemed less certain of his ground. His eyes were still pitiless, but annoyance was beginning to creep in. "You'd better hurry it," he growled.

Hale continued, to Allenby, "Mike Kolb came to see you, didn't he? How much did he tell you?"

"He didn't get much chance to tell me anything. He said if I'd make the price big enough we could make a

deal on some information on the murder that would be to my advantage. That's all I waited to hear. I threw him out and he threatened me, said I'd be sorry, cut my own throat—things like that." Allenby paused. "That made it sound all the more like blackmail. I thought he might have seen me, or Lyda. I was too worried at the time to think much of other things. But I wouldn't pay blackmail, for that or anything else."

"I knew you wouldn't," Hale said. "I thought it must be something like that. Kolb was out for money, and all he could get. At that, his instincts—if he had any—were on the right side at the beginning. He wouldn't give information for nothing, regardless of the consequences, but he came to you first. He knew Carter was the man, must have also known that he was engaged to your sister-in-law. For a price he'd tell the truth. If you had heard him out that morning, it would have been a lot simpler. When you turned him down, he went to Carter."

"Yes," Allenby said, "I see. I'm sorry."

"You didn't have much choice then, did you, Bill?" Hale said.

"He asked for it," said Carter bitterly. "Just like Gorham. He was a rat. I would have had to pay him as long as I lived. And listen, I'm getting fed up with this. Don't kid yourself that you can talk me out of it. You got in my way and you're coming along. You were so damn anxious to stick your nose in, now let's see if you can take it." He waved the gun at Delemater and Cody. "Go on, you two."

Hale saw that the others were out of the room; he saw, too, that Carter was getting nervous, knew that the gun in his hand might go off at any moment.

"I'm staying," Cody said.

"Me, too," Delemater chimed in.

"Okay," Carter said. "But get this straight. It's all right with me if you go for a gun. Hale gets it first, and then we'll see. But remember, if you want to argue, you'll go through with it. If I can get the two of you, I'll do it." His eyes came back to Hale, and he seemed to flatten out his feet a little, as though he had to brace himself and was not sure of his balance; then—

A shrill, insistent ringing exploded in the room to shatter the silence. Delemater was two strides from the telephone, and without hesitation started for it. Carter warned him uncertainly as he took the first step, but Delemater ignored him and took the second; then the moment was past and Carter had held his fire.

"Hello," Delemater said. "Yeah. . . . Yeah." He glanced over at Hale. "For you. Plymouth calling. The doc, I guess."

"You don't mind," Hale said, glancing at Carter.

He was a little shaky now and he felt the dampness at his palms. At that, he had to admire Delemater's complete calmness, the way he carried out his assignment. It was the way they had planned it, but under quite different circumstances. Actually, Hale had forgotten all about this call during the pressure of the past few minutes. It could not have come at a better time; it meant another two or three minutes to find a way out.

The call was not from Plymouth, nor from any doctor; it came from the *Courier-Herald*. Kent Murdock was doing the calling—and right on schedule. This was to be the psychological straw that broke Bill Carter down, destroyed his defiance, his denial. This was the moment when Delemater was to have his gun handy

in case Carter became desperate. Until now, however, Carter should be scoffing at Hale's accusations, demanding more definite proof. With the piling up of evidence, this fake call would clinch the case. Barclay had returned to consciousness and could make some statement shortly.

He lifted the telephone, and Kent Murdock's voice said, "I hope you've got something after all my waiting around to put this call in."

"Really?" Hale made his voice sharp, interested. "He is? How long? Almost any time, eh?"

"Is it okay to come over?" Murdock asked. "With that kind of talk how do I know when you mean it?"

"Do so by all means—and thank you very much." He hung up. To make the statement he had rehearsed seemed like mockery now, but an explanation was called for and he said what he had intended to say in the beginning. "Barclay's showing signs of recovering consciousness." He moved back to the bar wagon, glanced at Carter. "The doc thinks he should be able to make a statement very shortly. Thought you'd like to know just—"

He checked the sentence abruptly because he saw something in Carter's face. The interlude had crumpled his resolve. He had been ready to pull that trigger when the telephone rang; now he had to work himself up to it again and Hale jumped into the opening, picking up a glass, dropping in a cube of ice, and adding Scotch.

"As long as we're taking our hair down, suppose you let us in on it. Why did Barclay *want* to kill you?" He picked up the siphon. "He'll tell us shortly, I think, and anyway I've sent some cables to London. One of my friends gave him my name and perhaps they know *why*

he wanted to come to me, but if you—"

"Sure, I'll tell you. Why not?" Carter's face was gray and stiff now, the shiny, desperate eyes the only spots of color in the mask. There was no courage here, only a horrible bravado that fed upon fear and hopelessness; nothing else was left. "Why not?" he repeated hoarsely. "Women, damn them! That's your answer. One mess after another. Sadism they used to call it sometimes." He laughed a harsh, jerky laugh. "So maybe I'm a little on the sadist side, huh?"

"I can believe it," Hale said.

"And Barclay had a sister. And she jumped out of a window. A high one. Is that enough for you or would you like all the details?"

"That's enough—almost," Hale said. "That was a little over a year ago—when you were at Cambridge."

"And Barclay was in India—Captain Barclay. The business was pretty well hushed up and it took him a hell of a while to find out I was the man."

"Gene Gorham knew about it," Hale said. "He liked Marion Powell, he knew what you were, and he was going to tell her what she could look forward to if she married you. Going to tell her Saturday—tomorrow—after he closed up. And then there wouldn't be any two million dollars for you, would there?"

Hale, moving a little while he talked, had reduced the distance between them to about five feet. Not for one instant did he believe Carter would not shoot. It was coming—and soon. He saw it in the man's face, every little line of it said so. The tenseness had come back. He was scared now, but not too much so to stop thinking. Standing still he had no chance. In action there might be hope. At that distance Carter could hardly fail

to hit him, but his bullets might miss a vital spot. Since he had nothing to lose, he decided to shorten the odds as best he could.

In a voice that was thin and deadly, Cody said, "That's the story, huh?"

Asking silently for one more minute, Hale looked over and said, "Yes. And I hope you're straight on Lee Fonseca. He and Mike Kolb complicated things plenty, but his part was simple and coincidental. He had a legitimate claim on Gorham, and Kolb went to collect, slugged him, and took the night's receipts. But you can't prove that now, with both of them dead. It's my fault things looked so tough, so let him out—"

He was talking fast, concentrating on what he said, so it was a few seconds before he realized that Cody was paying no attention. Five minutes ago Cody had been twelve feet away from Carter; now he was nearly as close as Hale. For a long time he had said nothing. He had been waiting, watching, gauging each little movement. It was not like him to accept this solution. That he had done so merely proved that he did not want to hurt Hale's chances. Now his mouth was smiling and unpleasant. Around the corners of his eyes was something relentless and implacable.

"Okay, Maxie," Carter said hoarsely. "Ready?"

Hale was not ready. In the back of his head he had a plan, but he wanted to get closer. The longer he talked, the better his chances. He tried to sound calm as he held his glass in front of him, the siphon poised above it.

"Are you?" he countered.

"Sure." Carter's twisted grin was fixed, his face damp with sweat. He knew when he pulled the trigger he signed his own death warrant, and it showed in the half-

crazed brightness of his eyes. "Sure, I'm ready."

"You've had a lot of luck the last three days," Hale went on. "You rode it hard—and it played out."

"Yeah." Carter wet his lips. "On account of you. Luck—you had it, too. Let's see who rides it to the end."

Hale had moved up ever so slightly. He was watching the gun and the trigger finger, still hoping. Then what he had been afraid of happened: Cody took a hand.

"Listen, sonny boy," he said. "You're not going to shoot that thing."

"The hell I'm not!"

Hale knew this was it. He was not quite ready. He thought he could get closer. But now the time had run out. Cody knew what was coming, and he was a cop. There was no rule in his book that said he should stand by and do nothing. This was part of his job, and he was moving in. He took a short forward step.

"Because I'm going to take it away from you."

Hale shot his glance at Delemater, noting that while he leaned slightly forward with arms bent, his hands were empty. Cody took another slow step.

Carter flattened his back a little tighter against the wall. "You're asking for it," he warned.

The muscles of Hale's shoulders set themselves for action and he began to talk in a husky, growling voice he did not recognize. He never knew what he said because Cody took another little step.

Carter's lips drew back and his teeth clenched hard. His knuckles tightened on the gun. Then, as nearly as a man might do two things in one motion, Hale pressed hard on the siphon lever and cocked his wrist.

Water shot from the nozzle in a quick, forceful stream, arching stiffly across the five feet of space. With-

out waiting to see what it hit, he dropped, and the gun in Carter's hand leaped and exploded.

That first convulsion of movement lasted no more than a brief second. That he was alive Hale owed to the fact that Carter had ducked instinctively from the sudden burst of water, firing as he did so, wildly, without aiming. It was really nothing but one quick spurt, for Hale released the pressure on the siphon as he dropped; but what there was smashed against Carter's chin and spattered across his stiff, gray face. When he blinked drops from his eyes and aimed again, Hale took off from the floor like a sprinter.

One short step and a dive would do it. Only it was too far—much too far. Carter's gun was on him. Behind it, wild, frustrated eyes with death in them. Staring straight into the muzzle, Hale took the step and saw the trigger finger squeeze down. He lowered his head, ducking as he lunged, some reflex automatically stiffening his body for the shock of the bullet.

The gun roared in his ears and something hot seared the side of his face. He felt his body hit Carter. Then a heavy, crushing blow smashed his side.

He knew he was falling, and, curiously enough, had time to wonder if he had actually heard a second blast of sound that seemed to come an instant before the blow crashed into his side. He hit the floor, rolled over. After that things were confused. He had to put them together to make sense and it took him quite a while.

On his hands and knees, he lifted his head. There was a gun on the rug. Near by, Carter lay on his side and stomach. Stretched across him and now pushing up from the floor was Lieutenant Cody.

Stunned and wide-eyed, Hale fought to recapture

reason. His hand went to his cheek. When he felt no cut, no blood, he knew the stinging blast had been a slight powder-burn. The heavy blow in his side had been Cody, whose charge must have been simultaneous. He had not been hit, but he did not know why until he thought to look at Sam Delemater.

There was a gun in his right hand—a big gun. There had been two shots, he realized, not one. And the first had been Delemater's. Had he not lowered his head in his final charge, he might have seen Carter's torso jerk under the deadly impact that staggered him and spoiled his aim again.

He stood up, feeling foolish and frightened and shaky, a little amazed that Delemater still looked like Delemater, that he was calmly putting his gun away, and that his round face was still deceptively mild.

Cody rose, picking up the gun. There was blood on one hand, but not his blood. Carter rolled over very slowly, pushing at the rug with one hand and struggling until he reached a sitting position. There was no sound but his labored breathing. He just hunched there, his right hand pressed to his chest, his blue eyes strangely dull.

Cody got out a handkerchief to wipe his hand. He was breathing hard and he gave Hale a disgusted glare.

"Maybe you had this all figured out, too," he said caustically. "It was a dandy party."

"You got what you came for, didn't you?" Hale snarled. Reaction had hit him. His brow was moist, his hands damp. He was still trembling a little, and in covering up, his voice was harsh, irritable. "I thought I was the one who was on the spot. You didn't have to rush him. You had a gun. Why didn't you use it?"

"With Sam around?" Cody cocked an eye at Delemater. "Don't be silly. That part's for him. He can grab and shoot while most of us are just reaching."

"Not quite," Delemater said frankly. "I got to have a little bulge some place." He waved an accolade to Hale. "That siphon gag was just what the doctor ordered. It's lucky you didn't forget to think." He pursed his lips and, still very mildly, said, "I guess the guy really meant business."

Hale was aware of commotion behind him and turned to see the others standing in the hall doorway, hesitant and frightened. Foremost was Sue Marshall, and he recalled the precautions he had taken to set up the dictagraph and have her in the bedroom to take down everything that might be said. Her hazel eyes were wide and staring now, and he realized the strain she must have suffered. *A hell of a detective you turned out to be,* he thought. What he said was, "I'm sorry. You'd better stay in the other room—all of you."

He heard the door open as he finished, and turned to see Kent Murdock move across the threshold. "Who was doing the shooting?" Murdock demanded; then his glance touched Carter and became grave. His lips framed a long, silent whistle before he said, "Carter," softly.

"Yeah," Carter's voice was thick. "Carter."

Murdock glanced about the room and brought his gaze back to Hale. "You held out on me a little, but it looks as if you did all right."

"Wait a minute now, Murdock," Cody ordered, recognizing certain signs.

"For what?" Murdock asked, unstrapping his platecase. "Am I going to have trouble with you?"

Cody, the telephone in his hands, considered an argument, decided it could wait until he had transacted other business, and put in his call.

"Go ahead," Carter told Murdock. "Only you'd better hurry it." His dull, glazed eyes moved over to Delemater. "Thanks. This way is best. It's easier than I thought."

Maintaining his sitting position with difficulty, he looked up at Hale, his lip curling faintly.

"You're good," he mumbled. "But for you, I wouldn't be here at all. I thought I could pay off for it, but even with a gun in my hand you outlucked me."

Hale looked away. The siphon lay on the rug near by and he picked it up, his hands still a trifle unsteady.

Chapter Twenty-three: A FINE BUSINESS

SAM DELEMATER put down the telephone, hummed a *dum-dum-di-da-di-dum,* and gave his hands a dry wash. He picked up his drink, took some, smacked his lips, and rocked complacently on heels and toes.

"If this could only keep up," he said cheerfully, "I'd quit the detective business. It's a lousy racket."

Hale bent one eye on him. "What did you do on the day?"

"With the one you picked out for me and that parlay I put over, I win one hundred and forty-seven bucks fifty."

"But how much do you collect?"

"Well—I was a little out up to the time I saw you. And I was on the hook a little to Marty." He paused for mental arithmetic. "So all together I collect twelve-fifty."

Hale opened his desk drawer and took out a check-

book. "I wonder how you do on a real bad day," he said, unable to suppress a grin.

"On a bad day," Sam said frankly, "I do very bad."

They had left the apartment as soon as possible after the shooting. The others, with the exception of Marion Powell, who said she had no place to go, had all gone home, and Hale had come down to the office with Sue and Sam Delemater to get things straightened out and give Sue a chance to transcribe her notes. Now Sue was banging away at the typewriter in the outer office and Marion sat on the divan, a glass in her hand, a tired, far-away look on her face.

"How much do I owe you?" Hale asked.

"Would a hundred be too much?"

"A hundred would be cheap." Hale wrote the check, tore it out, and leaned back to let it dry. While he waited, Cody came in. "Did you give out much of a story to the papers?" Hale asked.

"Enough," Cody said. "They can get the rest at Headquarters."

"I hope we get our names in it," Delemater said.

"You will."

"And I shouldn't have any kick from you," Hale added. "If you gave out the story, it ought to satisfy you."

"I still think it would have been better if you'd told me the truth in the first place," Cody said stubbornly.

Hale shook his head. "You may think so, but you're wrong. We don't know yet whether Barclay will live, or if I'll get any definite dope from my cables. You could have arrested Carter, but that wouldn't—" His eyes touched Marion Powell, and he jerked them back. "Anyway, I think this is better."

"What he means," Marion explained wearily, "is that

it would have muddled up things for me." Hale started to interrupt, but she shook her head and went on hurriedly. "If you had arrested him, I wouldn't have known what to do. I have a strange streak of loyalty in my otherwise worthless make-up, and probably that, and the idea of being a martyr, would have appealed to me as long as there was hope for Bill. This way Max broke it cleanly for me—and that's why he had to hurry."

Cody was uncomfortable, and to change the subject he nodded and then looked back at Hale.

"Since you're the detective," he said dryly, "suppose you tell us how you knew it was Carter so far back."

"I knew it when Kolb was murdered, if that's what you mean."

"How? What clue said so?"

"If by clue you mean a pink garter or a missing button or something like that, there wasn't any. That's why that performance of mine was necessary tonight. The conviction that Carter was the man was solely a matter of reasoning, as far as I was concerned. I could only figure three men as logical possibilities. When I found I could eliminate two of them—"

Cody eyed him skeptically. "Eliminate for me."

"All right. Suppose we call the killer Mr. A. After Kolb's death I had to assume that Kolb knew Mr. A was the murderer, otherwise he would not have been killed. The exact details are guesswork, naturally, but I'll give it to you as I saw it. Mr. A came up the back way, to be sure he wasn't seen by the clerk, found the door unlocked, and entered Gorham's apartment. Unlocked because we know Kolb came in to get the night's receipts and he must have pressed the button on the lock when he went out, to be sure he got back—he'd be one of

the last to leave anyway.

"I have an idea that after Kolb slugged Gorham, Mr. A buzzed the buzzer and Kolb ducked into another room, perhaps the foyer closet. He didn't know what was up and he was in a spot. Mr. A tried the door, found it unlocked, and went in; he found Gorham on the floor, or perhaps just recovering from the blow. In any case, since murder was in the back of his mind, whether he had intended to do it right then or not, this was an obvious opportunity. Gorham had been slugged by somebody, so why not make that somebody take the rap for murder? For all we know, Kolb may even have heard the shot, but in any case we know he saw Mr. A."

"Yeah," Cody said thoughtfully, "you knew Kolb saw Mr. A. You didn't know he was Carter."

"Certainly I did. It had to be unless it was a complete outsider."

"Why the hell did it?"

"By your own evidence, Kolb took a taxi at around a quarter of two. If Kolb had seen or knew of the crime, *it had to be done before that time—which definitely eliminated Allenby*. And don't forget, Kolb had an alibi until two-thirty. With the taxi-driver."

Delemater began to hum softly, glancing at Cody with pleased approval. Cody rubbed his jaw, made some noises in his throat, and said, "Yeah."

After he had thought awhile, he scowled and cocked his head to one side. "Okay. The time element let Allenby out, but how does that eliminate this Barclay guy?"

"That's what I meant when I said Kolb's death convinced me it was Carter. Kolb saw the killer; he tried to blackmail the killer and was in turn murdered. Okay. If Barclay was the man, how could Kolb blackmail

him?"

Cody said, "Hunh?"

"How could he find him?" Hale put his arms on the desk, a faint smile brushing his lips. When he continued, his tone was deliberate, but not impatient. "Kolb left in a cab, made a phone call, and got home at two-thirty. He did not follow anyone. *So how would he know Barclay—a complete stranger, mind you—or where to locate him?* If Barclay had done the job and Kolb had blackmail in his mind, he would have followed him, or lost his chance. *He followed no one because he knew his man and could reach him whenever he pleased.* Kolb's death and the circumstances eliminated Barclay—at least for my money. And that left Carter, didn't it?"

"Da-da-di-dum-dum," hummed Delemater.

"Shut up!" growled Cody. He looked at Hale, but presently the annoyance went out of him. Reluctantly, but not without some admiration, he said, "I guess maybe you did have it figured."

"Until then," Hale said, "I thought Barclay was the man. He knew about my filing cabinet, knew where to get the envelope, was out for no good, and could have planted the gun and envelope in my apartment. The routine struck me as phony, but at the moment I was forced to accept that conclusion."

"So you finally admit you had the gun?"

Hale leaned back and grinned. "I'd have been a sucker to admit it before—to a guy like you." He paused, his face sobering again; then he explained about the envelope. "What I thought happened was, Barclay went to see Gorham and overstepped himself. He had to have the envelope because that held the story. He planted the

gun with me as a precaution; if things got too bad he could always call the police. And my story, my insistence that it was a plant, would look all the more ridiculous.

"But when I made up my mind about Carter, I saw that things fitted more logically. He had just killed Gorham because Gorham threatened his entire future; his method was obvious and direct, but still effective, and he stood an excellent chance of getting away with it—except for one thing. When he got home, he found Barclay waiting for him."

Hale finished off his drink and lit a cigarette.

"That did it. He had no choice. No alibi—with Barclay to talk—and the murder gun in his pocket. Until then his plan was fine, but he could not foresee this. It was the worst possible luck. Barclay was going to even up for his sister's suicide and, in the end, Carter would go to the chair for murder. Only Barclay wasn't as good as he thought he was and Carter turned the tables on him.

"By that time it must have been about three o'clock, since Carter had come downtown for a drink. Probably Barclay thought he was going to be killed and threatened Carter with the incriminating envelope I had in my office. That was a mistake, of course." Hale regarded the tip of his cigarette; then puffed on it. "So Carter came down and forced my filing cabinet. He had to get rid of the gun anyway, so why not plant it in my place? I was the only one he had to worry about and it was a good way to cross me off. If the gun was found, I'd probably think Barclay was the man."

"I wonder why he didn't tip us off sooner," Cody said.

"He didn't have to. That was an ace in the hole until he saw what the police thought. And at the time he made

the plant he did not know about Kolb. After he found out and saw what he had to do, I think he got his wind up and decided he'd better call you. It would be a good red herring, and should his high card fail—"

"What high card?" asked Cody.

"The fact that the police accepted the clerk's story that Gorham was alive at two-twenty, when he apparently left the hotel. Carter knew this wasn't so, could easily guess what had happened, and because of Allenby's almost identical build must have known it was he."

"But you believed the clerk, too."

"At first, yes. Why not?"

Hale paused when Sue Marshall, having finished her typing, came quietly in to sit on the arm of the divan. He got up to make a drink for her and one for Cody, apologizing for not having done so before.

"Boy, what a set-up!" Cody mused. "Allenby lying his head off, and as long as he held out, Carter was safe." He sampled more of his drink. "How did you tumble?"

Hale shrugged. "After Kolb was killed I thought it had to be Carter, as I told you; yet it could not be if Gorham was alive at two-twenty. The two ideas were incompatible, so I set out to break one down. Adelaide Rankin helped some—"

"Another swell job of holding out," Cody grumbled.

"—when she put her call on Gorham so close to the time he was supposed to have left. The clerk did the rest. His story about not knowing the tune Gorham was singing didn't fit with what I knew, and then the other night"—his gaze slid over to Marion Powell—"I found out Allenby was tone deaf. He was at the hotel at the right time, he was built right, and—" He shrugged with his hands. "That's why I had to break Allenby's story—

why I staged that thing tonight. Whether it was right or wrong and whether you believe it or not."

"I believe it," Cody said.

"You should," Delemater put in dryly.

"At that, you can't blame Allenby—in a way," Cody admitted grudgingly. "He walks in on a dead man just after his wife has left—you think he saw her, huh?"

"She must have been ringing the buzzer when she heard the elevator coming up," Hale said. "She probably didn't worry until the indicator passed the fourth floor; then she ran for the back stairs." He paused thoughtfully, his lips pursed. "When he stepped out he must have been a little uneasy himself. He heard someone on the stairs—you know how women's high heels sound on those metal-treaded stairs—and went over to look down. Then he had to go in. I doubt if he thought she had killed him, but she was in a spot and so was he. It was a mistake, but it was clever and he had little time to second-guess. A scandal one way, if he or his wife were tied up to the murder; a clean break the other if he got away with it."

"You don't know why he went to see Gorham?" Cody asked.

"No." Hale shook his head. "And if I did I probably wouldn't tell you."

Cody grinned, finished his drink, and stood up. "I guess that's about it. The only other thing is taking Barclay to the boathouse, and I ought to be able to figure that one. Carter had to get rid of him in a hurry, and it's tough to dispose of a body in the city. It was no good to kill him and dump him because when we found him we would've identified him sooner or later. But as long as he was missing, we had to figure him as a possibility.

And that was all the better for Carter."

"And I don't think he worried much whether Barclay was dead or alive," Hale said. "Because he could have only had one thing in mind—to make sure we never found him. He remembered Allenby's summer place, and the boathouse. It was a natural, because at that time he didn't know about Kolb, or that Allenby was going to give him a beautiful alibi. All he had to worry about was Barclay, and me. With no other complications, and with my story to you about his call and threat, Barclay would have taken the blame for everything."

Hale stood up, poured a short drink. "I have an idea this unexpected security made it possible for Sam and me to find Barclay. Carter's been pretty busy lately, but tonight was all he had left. Maybe if I hadn't made Marion bring him around to the apartment, he would have made a little trip to Marshville later. With a skiff and some weights—"

Cody buttoned his coat. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah. Well —I guess maybe you're not such a lousy detective after all. Maybe you're even pretty good."

"What do you expect?" Hale grinned. "Give me time and I might get to be as good as Sam, here."

Delemater waved his hand. "Don't kid me."

"I mean it," Hale said. "The way you ran down Kolb, and the Rankin woman; what you did tonight—"

"Is that good?" Delemater said. "Phooey. The gun stuff is practice and the other's routine. Anybody can do it after they've tried a couple of times. But this kind of job—" He grunted softly. "You're a better dick right now than I'll ever be. And I'll tell you why—because you think. If you're going to stick in this racket, keep on thinking. You can hire plenty of 'em to handle the other

end." He looked over at Cody and, rather belligerently for Delemater, said, "And you *know* I'm right."

"I made two bad mistakes." Hale frowned absently. "I should have wiped Fonseca's fingerprints off that gun, and I misjudged Carter when I should have kept my eyes on him every second."

"Don't let it worry you," Cody said. "Your batting average is still pretty good." He stopped by the door. "Only remember, when it comes down to police work, and fooling around with fellows who like to play with guns, you'd better call me—or in a pinch you might take a chance on Sam." He grinned as he went out.

Delemater sighed and said, "Now if you'll just tear yourself loose from that check, I'll shove off."

Hale laughed, said he had forgotten about it, and handed it over.

Delemater said good-night to Sue and Marion; to Hale he said, "Well, much obliged. If you happen to see anything running at Rockingham that looks good to you, give me a buzz."

Marion stood up, and Hale came around the desk to meet her. "You should have gone home."

"No. Really. I'm glad I came. I—I liked it."

"What about Stephen and Lyda?" he asked gently. "Do you know yet why he went to see Gorham?"

Marion Powell nodded. "Some nasty-minded soul—he wouldn't say who—wrote him about Lyda meeting Gorham. He didn't know about the IOU's or letters, he just wanted to see Gorham alone and have it out with him. Of course, he couldn't know how serious it was; that's why he hurried back. And, being Stephen, he didn't want Lyda to know about his being in town, so he planned to spend the night at a hotel."

"Does he know the truth now?"

"He guessed the truth the day I said the IOU's were mine. But he wouldn't say anything. Lyda told him tonight. And he told her, and"—Marion shrugged with one hand—"I guess it was a good thing. They're closer than ever now, and Lyda won't be making the same mistake again. It happened in the bedroom while you and Bill—" Her voice trailed off.

Hale watched her, saw that she was very tired. There was not much color in her cheeks, and her eyes were deep pools of resignation, still and calm.

"I know it's tough," he said quietly, "but it would have been worse if you loved him."

"How did you know?" she asked in mild surprise.

Hale shrugged. "You didn't, did you?"

"I'd almost convinced myself I did." She thought about it for a while. "Now I know I couldn't have—or I wouldn't feel like this. Somehow, it doesn't seem very real now. Maybe I lack something inside." A faint sigh escaped her. "Do they think—will he live?"

He shook his head. "I knew that when I left."

"I'm glad," Marion Powell said simply. "He wanted it that way and—it's much better, isn't it?"

"For both of you."

The telephone rang. Hale picked it up and sat on the edge of the desk. "Hello. . . . Yeah. That's okay, forget it." He grinned over at Marion and listened for quite a while. "It was my own fault," he said finally. "Yeah, I'll remember. . . . Sure. . . . Lee Fonseca," he explained as he hung up. "From now on he says the wine at the Circle Bar is on him."

Marion stepped up and tentatively put out her hands as she spoke. "I suppose I should thank you, too. For do-

ing everything so quickly. But I hated you when I thought you were suspicious of Stephen."

"I was suspicious of him." He took her hands lightly. "But not in the way you thought."

She marshaled her defenses and her voice took on an old familiar tone. "I guess it wasn't Bill so much," she said, "as the idea of marriage. I suppose that sounds pretty awful, doesn't it? But I am a rather offensive brat, you know. I still think the idea is all right."

"So do I. You'll find someone—"

"I don't suppose there's any chance with you?"

For a moment or two all Hale could do was look at her. Then a rush of tenderness swept over him. Her tone was still casual, and she was smiling a little; but he sensed her great loneliness and knew how desperately she was trying to escape it. He thought she spoke now from her reaction, yet fundamentally what she said was so true. It had never been Bill; it had been companionship, understanding, that she wanted.

In trying to find the right approach he fumbled a little, his eyes concerned. "I refuse to answer, on account it might tend to incriminate me."

There it was. Marion Powell met it nicely, covering up with mock regret. "You *would* have to be a lawyer."

He smiled at her and squeezed her hands, conscious of an odd thickness at the back of his throat. What he wanted to say was, *You'll forget this before you know it, and when you do you'll look around and be glad we played it this way;* what he said was, "Look, angel. You *know* I'm a bum. I'll need a little while to outgrow it."

He was aware that his words sounded smug and unsatisfactory, but she did not seem to notice it.

"Of course you're a bum, darling." She freed her

hands, put them alongside his face, and, leaning over, kissed him on the mouth. "Well," she said gaily, turning quickly away, "perhaps some other time."

She was in the doorway before Hale knew it. He slid off the desk, conscious of Sue Marshall's gaze, but not meeting it. By the time he caught up with Marion she had rung for the elevator. "Hey," he called, "wait a minute. You can't go home alone."

"Of course I can. My car's right out front."

"We'll pop it in a garage. I'll drive you home."

"No, really, Max." She would not look at him.

"But it's late." He took her arm.

She resisted stubbornly and he thought he saw a teardrop glisten on her cheek. The elevator door opened then, and she pulled away. "I've done it dozens of times," she insisted. "Please, Max."

He knew she meant it, and argued no longer. When he walked back down the hall he felt hot and uncomfortable and ashamed, his helplessness tempered only by a stubborn sense of relief.

Sue was watching him as he entered, and as he looked at her he saw that her eyes were strangely moist, as though something had melted inside her. He grew more uncomfortable until she spoke.

"You're a fool!" she said tartly.

He scowled at her. Her tone did not go with her eyes, and he did not realize that Sue had a defensive mechanism of her own.

"She's miles too good for you."

"Sure."

"Well—" Sue stood up—"you'll never have another chance to get a girl like her."

"What chance? She didn't mean anything, and you

know it."

"Didn't she?"

"She just—say! What is this, anyway?" His face puckered up and grew a little fierce in a mild sort of way. "What's your trouble?"

Sue made no reply, but went into the outer office and began to put on her hat and coat. Presently he started to grin, beginning to feel a little better. He snapped off the light, closed the door. "I'll take you home. You can tell me how good I am on the way out."

"What makes you think you're good?"

"We did all right on our first two cases, didn't we?" They went into the hall, locking the door. "If it wasn't so late I'd make you go out and help spend that hundred bucks we earned."

Sue sniffed at him. "You took in a hundred dollars and paid it right out to Delemater. A fine business."

"That's because I need practice," Hale said calmly. "If I keep at it, maybe I'll get good enough to do the whole thing myself. Then we can keep the profits."

Sue stole an upward-slanting glance at him that became an odd mixture of exasperation and tenderness when she saw how tired he was. His dark eyes held a burned-out brightness that left them hot-looking and bloodshot. That he could retain his sense of humor after what he had been through made her ashamed of her bickering, and she said no more. Proudly, a little possessively, she took his arm, and together they went down the hall to the elevator.

The Charlesview -
scene of murder in
"Murder for the Asking"
1. Elevator
2. Foyer + phone
3. Reception Room
4. Game Rooms
5. Bar + Food
6. Gorham's
living quarters
Gene Gorham's apartment
1
2
3
4
5
6
6
A DELL BOOK
Adelaide Rankin's apartment